Chapter II

OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET
The Celestial Things Found Above
Written during the dark hours immediately before and during the Second World War, C. S. Lewis's Space Trilogy, of which *Out of the Silent Planet* is the first volume, stands alongside such works as Albert Camus's *The Plague* and George Orwell's *1984* as a timely parable that has become timeless, admired by succeeding generations as much for the sheer wonder of its storytelling as for the significance of the moral concerns. For the trilogy's central figure, C. S. Lewis created perhaps the most memorable character of his career, the brilliant, clear-eyed, and fiercely brave philologist Dr. Elwin Ransom.

*Out of the Silent Planet* takes us to the planet Malacandra (Mars)—and into the meaning of “human.” In his first venture into science fiction, Lewis presents an encounter between a trio of interplanetary travellers and the rational inhabitants of an alien planet. Lewis’s enjoyment of science fiction began in his boyhood, when two of his favourite authors were H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. They inspired him to write, when he was six, a story entitled “To Mars and Back.” It was not, however, mere stories of the heavens that he liked. He and his brother were given a telescope when Lewis was eleven, and this opened up a life-time interest in the heavenly bodies. Later, as an Oxford undergraduate, he wrote to Arthur Greeves on 5 May 1919 about his poem on the goddess Venus. It was based upon, he said, “a
very curious legend about Helen" whom the magician Simon Magus takes up into the heavens. On the way, "they had to fight 'the Dynasties' or planets - the evil powers that hold the heaven, between us and something really friendly beyond." He did not finish the poem, but the theme was to reappear in the struggle of the Oyeresu to free the Silent Planet from the "Bent One."

"The idea of other planets exercised upon me," he says in *Surprised by Joy II*, "a peculiar heady attraction, which was quite different from any other of my literary interests. The interest, when the fit was on me, was ravenous, like a lust...my own planetary romances have been not so much the gratification of that fierce curiosity as its exorcism."2

In about 1935 Lewis came across a book that was to have a powerful influence on him, David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920). The author's style was crude and his subject matter nearly diabolical. However, as Lewis said in a letter of 4 January 1947 to Ruth Pitter, "From Lindsay I first learned what other planets in fiction were really good for: for *spiritual* adventures. Only they can satisfy the craving which sends our imaginations out off the earth."3 He was to mention this "shattering," intolerable and irresistible work years later in his essay on science fiction in which he makes the valuable distinction that
good novels are "comments on life.... They give, like certain rare
dreams, sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of
the range of possible experience." 4

Lewis was able tolerate David Lindsay's philosophy because his
novels never pretended to be anything more than holiday-literature. On
the other hand, there were others who were deadly serious about
carrying their poisonous philosophy to other planets. In a letter to
Roger Lancelyn Green on 28 December 1938 Lewis wrote:

What immediately spurred me to write was Olaf
Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (Penguin Libr.) and an
essay in J.B.S. Haldane's *Possible Worlds* both of wh.
seemed to take the idea of such travel seriously and to
have the desperately immoral outlook wh. I try to pillory
in Weston. 5

The "last men" in Stapledon's book are those pioneers in space
who, in their effort to survive, slaughter the inhabitants of Mars and
Venus. They eventually evolve from a "super-brain" into the "cosmic
ideal" of a kind of world-soul or soul of all. Prof. Haldane, a well-
known biochemist, biologist and Marxist, summed up what Lewis found
so distasteful about colonizing space. Haldane hated Christianity, and in
"Last Judgement" in his *Possible Worlds and Other Essays*, he
imagines how, just before the earth is destroyed, some men might journey to Venus and conquer it. He believed that “man should live for ever,” and on Venus his ideal man is “somewhere in between” an ant-heap mentality and a race “absorbed in the pursuit of individual happiness.” Haldane expected man to jettison anything remotely ethical for, as he said, “God’s ways are not our ways.”

Lewis and Haldane never met but, following the publication of Lewis’s trilogy, a review by Haldane entitled “Auld Hornie (The Devil) F.R.S.” appeared in *The Modern Quarterly* (Autumn 1946). He paid Lewis the compliment of comparing his celestial landscapes and the human and non-human behaviour to the work of Dante and Milton, but he nevertheless took the novels to be an attack on science. Because so many have made this mistake, it is fortunate that we have Lewis’s reply to Prof. Haldane in which he disputes this.

*Out of the Silent Planet* was not, he insisted, an attack on science, but:

...on something which might be called “scientism” — a certain outlook on the world which is casually connected with the popularization of the sciences, though it is much less common among real scientists than among their readers. It is, in a word, 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. I am not sure that you will find this belief
formally asserted by any writer. Such things creep in as
assumed, and unstated, major premises.8

In Michaelmas Term 1928 Lewis began a series of public
lectures on “The Romance of the Rose and its Successors.” A few
years later he began another series on the “Prolegomena to Medieval
Poetry.” In time they were brought together as the “Prolegomena to the
Study of Medieval and Renaissance Literature.” In them he discusses
the Ptolemaic model of the universe and the astrological
personifications of Mars, Venus, and the other ones he gave at
Cambridge, and together they became the core of his last book, The
Discarded Image, which provides an invaluable background to the
interplanetary novels.

One of the books discussed in the “Prolegomena” lectures was a
little-known work by a twelfth-century Platonist, Bernardus Silvestris.
His De Mundi Universitate, edited by Carl Sigmund Barach and Johann
Wrobel, which Lewis finished for the first time on 4 August 1930,
was to have an enormous influence on his trilogy. In appendix I on “Genius and Genius” in *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis distinguished between Genius A, which means “the universal God of generation,” and Genius B, which means the “tutelary spirit,” or “external soul” of an individual man. In Bernardus Silverstris he had come across the term Oyarses which a colleague at Magdalen College, C.C.J. Webb, pointed out to him in a letter of 31 October 1931, was a corruption of Ousiarches (Ruling essence) from Pseudo-Apuleius’s *Asclepius*. This was a very important discovery. The passage in Bernardes that was to play such an important part in his interplanetary trilogy was:

For the Usiarch, here was that Genius devoted to the art and office of delineating and giving shape to the forms of things. For the whole appearance of things in the subordinate universe conforms to the heavens, whence it assumes its characteristics, and it is shaped to whatever image the motion of the heavens imparts. For it is impossible that one form should be born identical with another at points separate in time and place. And so the Usiarch of that sphere which is called in Greek Pantomorphos, and in Latin Omniformis, composes and assigns the forms of all creature.⁹
This was ideal for Lewis’s purpose. He followed Bernardus in making an Oyarses or Oyarsa not only the “ruling essence,” the “Genius devoted to the art and office of delineating and giving shape to the forms of things,” but also something like an archangel. His “silent planet myth” was beginning to take shape. In 1935 he published a poem on “The Planets” in which he went beyond his medieval models in describing the essential qualities of those heavenly bodies. Now he went further. Having decided, as he told Ruth Pitter, that the other planets were good for “spiritual adventures,” he renamed the planet Mars “Malacandra” and provided it with an Oyarsa to rule it. In the letter of 28 December 1938 to Roger Lancelyn Green, he said he had a particular motive in mind when writing *Out of the Silent Planet*: “I like the whole interplanetary idea as a mythology and simply wished to conquer for my own (Christian) point of view what has always hitherto been used by the opposite side.”

One of the first to write a letter of appreciation for *Out of the Silent Planet* was Sister Penelope of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin. Replying to her on 9 August 1939, Lewis wrote:

What set me about writing the book was the discovery that a pupil of mine took all that dream of interplanetary colonization quite seriously, and the realization that
thousands of people, in one form or another, depend on some hope of perpetuating and improving the human species for the whole meaning of the universe— that a ‘scientific’ hope of defeating death is a real rival of Christianity....

You will be both grieved and amused to learn that out of about sixty reviews, only two showed any knowledge that my idea of the fall of the Bent One was anything but a private invention of my own! But if only there were someone with a richer talent and more leisure, I believe this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelization of England: any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.11

Lewis had long noticed, as he said in *Unreal Estates*, that “Most of the earlier stories start from the...assumption that we, the human race, are in the right, and everything else is Ogres. I may have done a little towards altering that.”12 In *Out of the Silent Planet* he turned the tables on the traditional view that “everything else is Ogres.” He had not written anything about the possible inhabitants of other planets before *Out of the Silent Planet* appeared, but in later years he expressed the
thoughts that he held when writing his interplanetary trilogy. These beliefs first found expression in *Miracles VII*. and then in *Religion and Rocketry* but a passage from *The Seeing Eye* will serve us well here. In essence, he thought that if we reached other planets:

We might...find a race which was, like us, rational but, unlike us, innocent – no wars nor any other wickedness among them; all peace and good fellowship. I don’t think any Christian would be puzzled to find that they knew no story of an Incarnation or Redemption, and might even find our story hard to understand or accept if we told it to them. There would have been no Redemption in such a world because it would not have needed redeeming....We should have much to learn from such people and nothing to teach them. We would find some reason for exterminating them.\(^\text{13}\)

The novel *Out of the Silent Planet* opens with Dr. Elwin Ransom, a middle-aged philologist of Cambridge University, on a walking tour. He is kidnapped by two men, Dick Devine and Dr. Weston, a mad physicist who wants to extend humanity to other planets. They force Ransom aboard their spaceship and fly to the planet Malacandra (Mars), where they hope to find gold. Although a
captive, Ransom relishes the voyage through the heavens, and the
description of it as seen through his eyes is one of the finest things in
the book:

He had read of ‘Space’: at the back of his thinking for
years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold
vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate
the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him
till now - now that the very name ‘Space’ seemed a
blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in
which they swam. He could not call it ‘dead’; he felt life
pouring into him from it every moment. How indeed
should it be otherwise, since out of this ocean the worlds
and all their life had come? He had thought it barren; he
saw now that it was the womb of worlds, whose blazing
and innumerable offspring looked down nightly even upon
the earth with so many eyes – and here; with how many
more! No: Space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had
been wiser when they named it simply the heavens ....(35)

During the voyage Ransom, overhearing Weston and Devine,
learns that he has been brought along as a sacrifice to creatures called
sorns. On arrival in Malacandra, Ransom is struck by the bright, still,
sparkling, unintelligible landscape—with needling shapes of pale green, thousands of feet high, with sheets of dazzling blue soda water, and acres of rose-red soapsuds. However, when they spot a group of sorns—spindly and flimsy things, twice or three times the height of a man—he is terrified and manages to escape.

In hiding he encounters another of the three species of beings on Malacandra. It is a hross who has a sleek, black body very like that of a seal or an otter. The hross begins talking and Ransom gradually picks up the language of Malacandra. The language is “Old Solar,” the language spoken before the Fall of Man. Ransom loses confidence several times in dealing with the hross:

They arose when the rationality of the hross tempted you to think of it as a man. Then it became abominable—a man seven feet high, with a snaky body, covered. face and all. with thick black animal hair, and whiskered like a cat. But starting at the other end you had an animal with everything an animal ought to have—glossy coat, liquid eye, sweet breath and whitest teeth—and added to all these, as though Paradise had never been lost and earliest dreams were true, the charm of speech and reason. Nothing could be more disgusting than the one impression;
nothing more delightful than the other. It all depended on
the point of view. (69)

Hyoi the hross who befriends Ransom—takes him to the valley
where his people live. Ransom is delighted with their simple
agricultural life, and especially the hross cubs to whom he appears a
“hairless goblin” (79). Their only art is a combination of poetry and
music. Ransom discovers that there are two other rational species on
Malacandra: the sorns or seroni, tall, lean creatures like elongated men,
their legs covered with feathers, who are devoted to scientific research;
and the pfiftriggi, frog-like creatures who work as miners and artisans.

After becoming fluent in Old Solar, Ransom learns that on
Malacandra the Earth is called Thulcandra—the “Silent Planet.” The
nearest Malacandrian equivalent to evil is “bent.” When they learn that
Ransom’s “bent companions” tried to kill him, the hrossa tell him he
must to go the Oyarsa. All he can learn of the Oyarsa is that he has
always lived at Meldilorn, that he knows everything and rules
everyone. When he inquires if the Oyarsa made the world, the hrossa
are surprised. They ask whether people in Thulcandra not know that
Maleldil the Young has made and still rules the world. Before Ransom
has realized who Maleldil the Young is, and is about to undertake the
religious instruction of the hrossa, he realizes that
Ever since he had discovered the rationality of the *hrossa* he had been haunted by a conscientious scruple as to whether it might not be his duty to undertake their religious instruction; now, as a result of his tentative efforts, he found himself being treated as if *he* were the savage and being given a first sketch of civilized religion—a sort of *hrossian* equivalent of the shorter catechism. It became plain that Maleldil was a spirit without body, parts of passions. (83)

The three species of *hnau* are not the only inhabitants of Malacandra. There are also spiritual beings called the "*eldila*" (singular "*eldil*") who are visible to Ransom only as a faint movement of light. They are present throughout the planet and take a benevolent interest in the life of the Malacandrians. They inform the *hrossa* that the Oyarsa has sent for Ransom. However, just before Ransom leaves, there is the crack of an English rifle and Hyoi lies dead at his feet. Weston and Devine are on to him. Ransom is heartbroken and ashamed of his race. When the *hrossa* show him the way to Meldilorn where he is to meet the Oyarsa:
Ransom was by no means convinced that this was the best plan either for himself or for the hrossa. But the stupor of humiliation in which he had lain ever since Hyoi fell forbade him to criticize. He was anxious only to do whatever they wanted him to do, to trouble them as little as was now possible, and above all to get away. It was impossible to find out how Whin felt; and Ransom sternly repressed an insistent, whining impulse to renewed protestations and regrets, self-accusations that might elicit some word of pardon. Hyoi with his last breath had called him hnakra-slayer; that was forgiveness generous enough and with that he must be content. As soon as he had mastered the details of his route he bade farewell to Whin and advanced alone towards the forest. (104) (Emphasis added)

The Seroni live at the top of the steep Malacandrian mountain, and Ransom meets this species next. The sorn Augray acts as his host and explains many things to him. He tells him more about the eldila than the hrossa were able to do, and Ransom learns that the Oyarsa is himself the eldil who from the time Malacandra was made was put in charge of the planet. On their way to Meldilorn, Augray and the sorns
have many questions for Ransom about Thulcandra. They are astonished at what Ransom tells them of human history – of war, slavery, and prostitution:

‘It is because they have no Oyarsa,’ said one of the pupils.

‘It is because every one of them wants to be a little Oyarsa himself,’ said Augray.

‘They cannot help it,’ said the old sorn. ‘There must be rule, yet how can creatures rule themselves? Beasts must be rules by *hnau* and *hnau* by *eldila* and *eldila* by Maleldil. These creatures have no *eldila*. They are like one trying to lift himself by his own hair – or one trying to see over a whole country when he is on a level with it – like a female trying to beget young on herself.’ (129)

They are surprised that there is only one rational species on Earth:

Two things about our world particularly stuck in their minds. One was the extraordinary degree to which problems of lifting and carrying things absorbed our energy. The other was the fact that we had only one kind
of *hnau*: they thought this must have far-reaching effects in the narrowing of sympathies and even of thought. (130)

Meldilorn is an island of pale red set in the middle of a lake. On the island is a grove of trees rising up to great heights like the spires of a cathedral and flowering at the top. After they cross over to it, Ransom meets some of the *pfifltriggi* who are carving pictures of history and mythology. Ransom notices that in their carving of the solar system the Earth is the only planet shown as having the representation of its Oyarsa erased.

Following a night there Ransom is taken to the Oyarsa of Malacandra. He cannot see him, but as the Oyarsa passes near him Ransom feels “a tingling of his blood and a pricking on his fingers as if lighting were near him, and his heart and body seemed to him to be made of water” (151). He learns from him the story of his planet as it is known throughout the solar system. The Oyarsa explains that the Earth, like all the planets, once had an Oyarsa. After he became bent it was in his mind to spoil other worlds besides his own. To prevent this Maleldil drove him out of the heavens and bound him in the air of his own planet. It thus became silent. The Oyarsa goes on to speak of what Ransom recognized as the Incarnation. “There are stories among us,” the Oyarsa says, that Maleldil “dared terrible things,
wrestling with the Bent One in Thulcandra" (154). He asks Ransom to tell him more of what Maleldil did on earth.

Before this can happen, they are interrupted by the arrival of a group of *hrossa* who are carrying the bodies of three of their companions and escorting Weston and Devine, who killed the *hrossa*. Oyarsa demands to know why they did this. Weston makes the mistake of supposing the Malacandrians the most primitive type of creatures. He blusters about his ability to blow everyone up "Pouff! Bang!" (162) and dangles beads before their eyes—"Pretty, pretty! See! See!" (163). They have never seen anything so comical. All Meldilorn shakes with laughter.

Weston, completely misunderstanding what a fool he is seen to be, tells Oyarsa that he is there on behalf of "Life" and that he and others intend to "march on, step by step...claiming planet after planet, system after system, till our posterity—whatever strange form and yet unguessed mentality they have assumed—dwell in the universe where the universe is habitable" (175). Weston has difficulty with Old Solar, so Ransom acts as a translator for him. This provides for some delightful irony as in the following passage:
‘I may fall,’ said Weston. ‘But while I live I will not, with such a key in my hand, consent to close the gates of the future on my race. What lies in that future, beyond our present ken, passes imagination to conceive: it is enough for me that there is a Beyond.’

‘He is saying,’ Ransom translated, ‘that he will not stop trying to do all this unless you kill him. And he says that though he doesn’t know what will happen to the creatures sprung from us, he wants it to happen very much.’ (176)

When Weston protests his love for mankind, Oyarsa says, “... what you really love is no completed creature but the very seed itself: for that is all that is left’ (177). Oyarsa realizes that Weston and Devine are, like the Oyarsa of Thulcandra, so bent that they are beyond his help. As a penalty he orders their space ship back to Malacandra. Ransom, who is protected by the eldila, goes with them. Oyarsa has given orders that their ship will explode in ninety days, and they barely make it back to the Earth in time.

In chapter 22 Lewis enters the story himself and the rest is told by him. He explains how, after Ransom’s return from Mars, he wrote to him about Bernardus Silvestris’s use of the word “Oyarses.” When they meet, Ransom tells him of his trip to Malacandra and the threat
to mankind from Weston. They decide that Lewis should write the story of Ransom’s journey, making it sound like a work of fiction lest Weston sue for libel.

Lewis hoped that his readers would understand the theology of Out of the Silent Planet without having to be told. However, when asked, he did not mind explaining the meaning of Maleldil. Victor Hamm was one of the many who speculated about the exact meaning of the word, and after sending Lewis a copy of his article, “Mr. Lewis in Perelandra” published in Thought 20 (June 1945), Lewis replied on 11 August: “MAL- is really equivalent to the definite article in some of the definite article’s uses. ELDIL means a lord or ruler, Maleldil ‘The Lord’: i.e. it is, strictly speaking, the Old Solar not for DEUS but for DOMINUS.”¹⁴ For the sake of clarity, we may note that the Old One is God the Father; the Bent One, or Bent Oyarsa of Thulcandra, is Satan; and the eldila are angels.

Many readers are of the view that Out of the Silent Planet is a book which is quite “un-put-downable.” The freshness of the writing reflects the boyish excitement with which Lewis wrote it and read it aloud, chapter by chapter, to his circle of friends. Into the excitement is woven a tragic sense of the Fall, both as something Romantically conceived (the ruin of the earth, of Man’s relationship with the beasts, of the erotic life) and as straight Christian theology. The theology does
not wage war on the story. The *eldils*, the angelic beings who are at first invisible to Ransom, and their hierarchic sense of obedience are introduced gently. And the sheer incidentals, the imagined languages of the Martian creatures, the poetic *hrossi*, the intellectual *sorns* and the practical and commercially minded *pfifltriggs* have a playful quality which, while being purely enjoyable, is not without satiric edge.

*Out of the Silent Planet* received many favourable reviews, but most readers were not sure what Lewis meant by it. One reviewer described it as “a first novel...of the kind to do with adventure beyond our Earth to which Mr. Wells long ago accustomed us.”¹⁵ One of the very few who saw what Lewis was doing was the Anglican divine, E.L. Mascall, who said, “This is an altogether satisfactory story, in which fiction and theology are so skilfully blended that the non-Christian will not realize that he is being instructed until it is too late. It is excellent propaganda and first-rate entertainment.”¹⁶ Another reviewer, Horace Reynolds said:

Everyone says a new world is just around the corner, but everyone is pretty vague about just what it is to be. The plain truth of the matter is that man has to imagine this new order before it can be realized. Mr. Lewis’s romance is one step forward in the preliminary dreaming, the discovery of the Mystery.¹⁷
References


