

11-1999

Paradise Imperiled in Perelandra: C.S. Lewis's Theology of Temptation

Ted Dorman
Taylor University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dorman, Ted (1999) "Paradise Imperiled in Perelandra: C.S. Lewis's Theology of Temptation," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 2 , Article 23.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol2/iss1/23

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1999

Upland, Indiana

Paradise Imperiled in *Perelandra*: C.S. Lewis's Theology of Temptation

Ted Dorman

Paradise Imperiled in *Perelandra* C.S. Lewis's Theology of Temptation

by Ted Dorman

What if the stage were set for the drama of Eden to play itself out once again? A different time, a different place, but the same Satanic temptation: what then?

C.S. Lewis's novella *Perelandra*—generally regarded as the best volume of his space trilogy (which also includes *Out of the Silent Planet* and *That Hideous Strength*)—confronts this question within the format of a fantasy wherein Elwin Ransom, erstwhile philologist and somewhat reluctant space voyager, journeys to Perelandra (that which we call Venus) and becomes the middle-man between a new Eve and the same old tempter, Satan. The ensuing drama, wherein Ransom struggles to prevent a repeat of what happened in *Genesis* chapter three, provides bountiful grist for intellectual grindstones of various sorts, be they literary, psychological or theological. It is Lewis's theology of temptation which chiefly concerns us here.

Aficionados of the Lewis space trilogy will recall how Ransom, prior to his journey to Perelandra, involuntarily accompanied the evil scientist Dr. Weston on a spaceship to the unfallen planet Malacandra (which we call Mars). There Ransom foiled Weston's plans to extend the imperialistic forces of Earth's eighteenth-century Enlightenment mentality to Malacandra. It is against this backdrop that *Perelandra* begins, with Ransom being recruited by an angelic being he met on Malacandra for a similar voyage to Perelandra—to what purpose, Ransom knows not.

Ransom's ignorance does not last long, however. Upon his arrival to Perelandra he

soon realizes that this planet, unlike the aging Malacandra, is in the process of being born, as it were. The final stages of this new creation manifest themselves vividly in streams of color and motion, with its crowning point being the appearance of the Green Lady, the Mother of Perelandra, the Eve of Venus.

As Ransom engages the Green Lady in conversation (in Old Solar, of course, not English), he discerns in her the sort of wide-eyed innocence which must have been part and parcel of the glorious awe experienced by our own Adam and Eve. There is, however, an important difference: the Eve of Venus is alone. She and her husband, the King of Perelandra, have been separated by moving islands. There is very little fixed land on Perelandra, and Maledil the Creator (He whom we call God) has commanded them not to inhabit the fixed lands.

This command does not trouble the Green Lady in the slightest: her adoration of Maledil is total; her trust in Him implicit. Perelandra is Paradise for the Green Lady, even if she has not yet found her lost King.

Trouble begins with the appearance of none other than Weston, whose spaceship arrives on Perelandra not long after Ransom's. At least, it *appears* to be Weston. Ransom confronts his old adversary and soon finds that the truth is much more disconcerting—indeed, it is diabolical. For the body of Weston houses a demonic presence, perhaps even that of the Prince of Demons, Satan himself.

The high drama of the Perelandran temptation begins in chapter eight. Ransom has left Weston and gone in search of the

Paradise Imperiled in *Perelandra* • Ted Dorman

Green Lady, only to find her in conversation with his arch-enemy. Weston is speaking to the Lady in tones of sweet reasonableness. He gently urges her to consider that things might not be as they now are, that she could leave the floating lands and abide in the fixed lands. And if she and the King were to live on the fixed lands, they would never have to be separated!

“But you remember that we are not to live on the fixed land,” she reminds him.

At this point Weston pulls out the first weapon in his arsenal of temptation: the two-edged sword of *imagination*. He urges her to dwell not on what *is*, but on what *might be*. “Might not that be one of the reasons why you are forbidden to [live on the fixed lands]—so that you may have a Might Be to think about, to make Story about as we call it?”

Of course, there is nothing wrong with “making Story” *per se*. Were that the case, C.S. Lewis would not have written *Perelandra*! But Weston is not dealing with matters of metaphysics or aesthetics here, but with the issue of *obedience to the divine command*. Here, then, we witness the temptation to focus on the *one thing prohibited* by God rather than on the *abundance of what is permitted and provided* by God. To focus on what one lacks, as opposed to what one has, is the beginning of *discontent*, which the second-century Christian apologist Tertullian deemed the root of Adam’s and Eve’s first disobedience. And such discontent gives rise to the notion that God is stingy, that He is somehow holding back on us, that He does not really have our best interests at heart.

The prospect of what Might Be does indeed capture the Green Lady’s attention: “I will think more of this.” At the same time, however, she refuses to focus her attention on

Weston. Instead, her thoughts turn to her lost spouse: “I will get the King to make me older [i.e., wiser] about it.”

At this point Weston cleverly shifts his strategy—or rather, supplements it with a second element of temptation: *flattery*.

“How greatly I desire to meet this King of yours!” exclaims Weston, thereby affirming the Lady’s esteem for her mate. Then, without missing a beat, the Tempter adds: “But in the matter of stories he may be no older than you.” Two temptations now exist in her mind: the fixed land, and her own wisdom.

It is upon this second temptation that Weston now seeks to build an edifice of *pride*, the first of the seven deadly sins. She should rely on herself, not on the King, Weston insists. She should be like the women of Weston’s world, he tells her. To which she replies: “What are they like?”

“They are of a great spirit,” Weston tells her, adding that they are much smarter than the men and that their thoughts run ahead even of what God would tell them. They already know the truth before God reveals it to them, Weston insists, clearly implying that such women do not need to seek God in order to gain wisdom, but can instead find it in themselves.

The Lady’s response to this, however, thoroughly confounds Weston. His glorification of the women of his world leads the Lady not to self-glorification or envy, but to a humble appreciation of that which is greater than she! She even relishes the prospect of bearing daughters “at whose feet I shall fall!” Her words echo John the Baptist’s joy in one greater than himself: “[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Weston senses he has lost round one and abruptly cuts off the conversation: “I will sleep

Paradise Imperiled in *Perelandra* • Ted Dorman

now." Nothing like a timely nap to get her mind off such dangerous ideas as humility.

Indeed, Weston's slumber turns out to be a diversionary tactic. For the demon-possessed body of Weston needs no sleep, as Ransom soon discovers. The evil doctor's diabolical indefatigableness in turn opens the door to his next strategy of temptation: wear 'em down!

Ransom discovers this when he intervenes in Weston's second effort to tempt the Green Lady to disobedience. No longer a mere spectator, the philologist urges the Lady not to listen to the Tempter but to obey Maledil. Weston counters with *ad hominem* arguments against Ransom (another satanic distraction), then reminds the Lady that Ransom himself had already taught her things not explicitly taught by Maledil!

[Ransom] himself . . . made you see a few days ago that Maledil is beginning to teach you to walk by yourself, without holding you by the hand You are becoming your own. That is what Maledil wants you to do.

This temptation towards independence from God echoes the references to the "knowledge of good and evil" in *Genesis* 2 and 3. It gains even more force as Weston adds:

Could the taking away of your hand from [Maledil's]—the full growing up—the walking in your own way—could that ever be perfect unless you had, if only once, *seemed* to disobey Him?

"How could one *seem* to disobey?" the Lady asks.

"By doing what He only *seemed* to forbid," Weston replies. "There *might* be a commanding which He wished you to break."

In other words, to obey Maledil's *design* for her (God's will of *purpose*), the Lady must seriously consider breaking one of His *commands* (will of *precept*)! The Devil is quite the theologian.

Ransom then warns the Lady that the drama now unfolding on *Perelandra* was played out once before on Earth, with disastrous results for the human race. Weston's reply employs one of the devil's favorite devices: religious rhetoric! Specifically, he uses the historic *felix culpa* argument that the devil's work in bringing about the Fall resulted in a greater good:

"[Ransom] has not told you that it was the breaking of the commandment which brought Maledil into our world and because of which He was made man. He dare not deny it."

"Do you say this?" the Lady asks Ransom.

Ransom's first response is nervous silence; he senses impending defeat and nearly gives up. Finally he gathers himself and replies:

I will tell you what I say Of course good came of it. Is Maledil a beast that we can stop His path . . . ? Whatever you do, He will make good of it. But not the good He had prepared for you if you had obeyed him. That is lost for ever And there were some to whom no good came nor ever will come.

Newly energized by the clear insight and confidence truth brings to the heart, Ransom then turns from the Lady and trumps Weston:

You, tell her all! What good came to you? Do *you* rejoice that Maledil

Paradise Imperiled in *Perelandra* • Ted Dorman

became a man? Tell her of *your* joys, and of what profit you had when you made Maledil and death acquainted.

The stark truth of *Christus Victor*, the triumph of the crucified Christ over the Devil, leaves Weston speechless. All he can do is howl: "a long, melancholy howl like a dog." As for the Lady, she promptly goes to sleep, evidently satisfied with Ransom's reply for the time being.

But Weston does not sleep. Having tried and failed once again with argumentation, he speaks to his adversary:

"Ransom?"

The philologist replies, "Well?"

"Nothing."

Pause. Then, Weston's voice again:

"Ransom."

"What is it?" Ransom responds sharply.

"Nothing."

"Ransom! . . . Ransom! . . . Ransom! . . . Ransom . . ."

And so it goes, on and on and on, reply or no. Weston cannot win arguments, so he begins a war of attrition, wearing Ransom down with a perpetual indefatigable nagging akin to that of a "nasty little boy." The devil, clever though he may be, cannot stand in the face of the truth. He must change the subject; he must lie, lie, lie, lie . . . until he wears us down.

Ransom's predicament is that Weston can wear him down physically, thus preventing Ransom from being able to intervene every time Weston seeks out the Lady in order to draw her into disobedience to Maledil's command. Whenever he is awake, Ransom seeks to intervene on the Lady's behalf. But his task is an impossible one. He cannot go without sleep; Weston can.

As days go by, Ransom perceives that Weston has time on his side. It seems inevitable that sooner or later Weston will prevail. The Lady holds her own, and then some, against Weston's arguments. But he then shifts tactics and begins telling her story after story of strong, tragic women such as Agrippina and Lady Macbeth, with whom he wants her to identify as a hero wronged by those who (like Ransom) would keep her from fulfilling her glorious destiny. Ransom finds the Lady's response disconcerting. She has not succumbed, but has nonetheless taken on the appearance of a "tragedy queen," whose expression is now a small but very real step removed from her original "unselfconscious radiance." Instead, Ransom perceives "the faintest touch of theatricality . . . the fatal touch of invited grandeur, of enjoyed pathos—the assumption, however slight, of a role." Ransom finds such role playing, compared to her former unpretentiousness, to be a "hateful vulgarity."

A greater vulgarity awaits Ransom, however. For Weston's next ploy to center the woman's affection upon herself is to adorn her with bird feathers and urge her to behold herself in a mirror (which Weston has brought with him from Earth). In this twofold homage to vanity Weston has broken new ground on two fronts. First, the woman can now behold herself, and therefore adore the self she sees. Second, her self-image is enhanced at the expense of the birds who died that their feathers might adorn her. Sin is never merely a private matter; sooner or later, it will affect those around us.

Had Weston's temptations been allowed to run their course, the reader can only speculate to what end they would have led. Ransom does not care to speculate, however. Distraught, desperate, apparently defeated, he

Paradise Imperiled in *Perelandra* • Ted Dorman

prays for Maledil to intervene. And intervene Maledil does—by means of Ransom himself.

But that is to go beyond the scope of our inquiry here. Our purpose has been to set forth in brief the drama of the Perelandran temptation, and what it tells us about the devices used by the Enemy of our souls. And what we find is an Enemy who, while cunning and powerful, is ultimately a defeated foe. Truth is not on his side; he can win arguments with the theologically uninformed, but cannot prevail against those who understand what he is up to.

What then *is* the Devil up to? Specifically, he seeks to convince us that happiness consists not in trusting in God's commands and promises, but instead relying upon our own wisdom and capabilities. "You shall be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). As Weston dealt with the Green Lady, so the Devil deals with us. He will try to make us beautiful, even at the expense of others, so that we might look upon ourselves with such delight that we look away from the author of all true beauty. He will try to make us heroic, that we might justify ourselves as victims of tragedy and injustice when things go badly for. And most important, he will never, never, never, never give up. His attack will be as relentless as Weston's "Ransom . . . Nothing . . . Ransom . . . Nothing . . . Ransom . . . Nothing . . . Ransom . . . Nothing . . ." *ad infinitum*.

There is only one solution to the Tempter's ongoing onslaughts. We must bank our hopes for future happiness not on devilish delights, but upon the promise of Christ that "at His right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11). Merely to call upon ourselves and others to "resist the devil," "hang in there," "do your duty" or other commendable exhortations will ultimately fail, for all these

are ultimately mere calls to duty. And while duty is indeed a necessary element of Christian obedience, mere calls to duty provide no *motive* for performing that duty.

For this reason God calls us to trust Him on the basis of His "great and precious promises" (2 Peter 1:3), including Jesus's promise of "treasure in heaven" for those who obey Him. For Christ knows full well what Christians all too often forget: *if people are given a choice between duty and delight, then delight will win every time!* The Psalmist therefore exhorts us, "*Delight yourself in the Lord!*" (37:4). And the writer of Hebrews defines saving faith as faith in God's provision of the *future grace* of a *heavenly hope* (what some would condescendingly call "pie in the sky"): "Anyone who comes to [God] must believe . . . that [God] *rewards those who seek him.*" And those rewards will exceed anything Satan can offer or that we can imagine.

Lewis himself made this explicit elsewhere:

. . . if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak We are far too easily pleased. (*The Weight of Glory* p. 1f.)

Lewis's focus on the pleasures of God likewise find expression in the final chapter of *Perelandra*. There the King and Queen are reunited and gain not only each other, but also a foretaste and promise of delights from their Creator which exceed their wildest imaginations. Weston's imaginary "Might Be" becomes their "Shall Be." And so shall it be for all who obey Maledil.