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**The Fissure Within The Spiritual Geography
of C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra***

James D. Lopp, III

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The April, 26 2002 issue of the "International Jerusalem Post" features an article titled, "Sanctity between time and space" by: Shilomo Riskin. Riskin states that the Hebrew word *kadosh*, or holy, literally means separate and exalted, an "other" which relates to the most supreme "Other One." Riskin then writes, "Rudolph Otto, in his work *The Idea of the Holy*, calls the holy the numinous, the *mysterium tremendum*; mind wrestles with language to discover a proper metaphor for exploring the aspects of life most related to the Holy One." The numinous allowed Shilomo Riskin to experience *Kadosh* ((the holy) in a sacred atmosphere where discourse between man and the Holy One is possible. When the "Christian Century" asked C.S. Lewis: "What books did most to shape your vocational attitude and your philosophy of life," Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* was on the list Lewis gave in response to this monumental question (Hooper 752). If Shilomo Riskin ventured to read C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra* he could enter through the open door of myth and breathe the same sacred and mysterious atmosphere that gives one unfettered access to live within the spiritual geography of a world where each visitor experiences *kadosh* through many image-laden passages. For, Lewis created *Perelandra* as an exalted, living embodiment of the numinous where the reader learns language that allows one to venture into ". . . the aspects of life most related to the Holy One."

With light hearted wit, Lewis circumvents the potentially toilsome endeavourer of placing *Perelandra* within a literary genre and tips his hat to the highbrow pretension within literary criticism by giving his work the simple title, a "supposal": for *Perelandra* asks the reader to suppose many things. First the reader is asked to suppose that two undefiled children of God live on a planet called *Perelandra*. Next Lewis supposes that the two children of God are destined for a temptation that may lead to a fall that parallels the Biblical account of Adam and Eve's fall on Earth. Yet unlike the Genesis

narrative, Lewis re-mythologizes the account of the fall and the reader is presented with the supposal that this time, on *Perelandra*, there is a joyful turn of events—a "eucatastrophe" to use a word that Dr. Tolkien admired. An epic struggle of good versus evil unfolds as Elwin Ransom travels from Earth to *Perelandra* and learns he has been chosen to avert the fall of the King and Queen of this innocent, new planet. In this story, there are miles of paradisiacal terrain to be crossed and wonderful truths to be experienced. *Perelandra* awakens the readers' five senses and leaves readers longing for a thousand more.

In writing *Perelandra*, Lewis remained at his post to tell his audience that the modern philosophy that has been perpetuated by men like Bertrand Russell burdens the human soul with questions such as: "What are you going to do when you find out that . . . all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole Temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins" (Kreeft 172)? In response to such attacks on the human soul Peter Kreeft states,

"Philosophical arguments are needed to refute the philosophy, but philosophical arguments alone will not lift the spell. Only good magic defeats bad magic. We need a spell weaver, a magician. When Tolkien's son had to fill out a draft induction form, he filled in the blank for 'father's occupation' with the word wizard. The same could be said for Lewis, especially in *Perelandra*" (173).

Lewis is a word-wizard of the highest order. He demonstrates the power of his pen by weaving a unique spell that works deep within the human imagination to transport the willing to *Perelandra* where the reader is permitted to travel with Ransom through the spiritual

geography composed of supra-rational terrain. Kreeft states that we need mythmakers as well philosophers to build the new 'joyful cosmology.' He writes: ". . . I know of no one, except perhaps Tolkien, who has contributed more to the building of this cathedral than Lewis—especially in his fiction, more especially in the "space trilogy," still more especially in *Perelandra*" (169). Lewis's contribution in building a joyful cosmology does not come through the role of the philosopher. His contribution comes from his wellspring of imagination. The genesis of *Perelandra* came through mental pictures of floating islands and seven lines of undated verse that mentions, "The alien Eve, green-bodied, stepping forth / To meet my hero from her forest home / Proud, courteous, unafraid, no thought infirm / Alters her cheek" (Hopper 220). *Perelandra* is a world of images, mental pictures that opens the door through which the reader may encounter the Wholly Other. These images go beyond the natural bounds of fiction; they form a cohesive, progressive sensory experiences which have the capacity to become a part of the reader's life experience and may take their place next to one's images of a childhood encounter with the seashore, or a trip to the Scottish Highlands where the sting of joy remains a memory of a memory.

In *Perelandra*, Lewis brings the numinous to the reader as he bypasses the need for rational explanation and conveys truth through myth by communicating ". . . the sense of that which is not only grave but awe-inspiring" (Gibb 81). It is this awe-inspiring space of myth in *Perelandra* that permits and entices one to personally move unfettered within the narrative and experience a unique stab of longing for paradise. Yet the myriad encounters with the numinous one gains through reading *Perelandra* are interrupted by impersonal philosophical dialogue between Ransom, the Queen, and the evil Dr. Weston. Lewis's decision to incorporate this change in literary style imposes upon the image-driven current that teaches and delights the reader. The reader becomes an impersonal bystander instead of an active participant who is able to move freely within the height, width, and depth of the text. A section of Lewis's essay, "Meditation In a Toolshed" provides one with an example of the dichotomy between Lewis's power to convey the Wholly Other in the image-driven sections of *Perelandra* and the flatness the reader finds in the extended, rational dialogue. Lewis writes:

I was standing today in the Dark Toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dusts floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was

seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no Toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, ninety-odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam and looking at the beam are very different experiences (God In The Dock 212).

Lewis continues: "We must on pains of idiocy deny from the very outset the idea that looking at is, by its own nature, intrinsically truer or better than looking along." This is true; but then Lewis claims, "One must look both along and at everything" (Italics mine 215). This last statement is rich in wisdom when applied to most circumstances. Yet, one does not need to look at myth to encounter the truths myth conveys. To keep the reader within the light of the text is the objective of a mythmaker.

The "Meditation In a Toolshed" analogy demonstrates that there are two perspectives one can use when looking at the same thing. This dual perspective view illustrates why there is a fissure in *Perelandra*. Being brought into the myth is analogous to seeing by the beam of light. The rational dialogue is analogous to looking at the beam of light and seeing "specks of dust floating in it." In deeply imaginative literature such as *Perelandra*, looking at the beam of light from the outside works against the reader's ability to fully enter into and remain inside the story. It is when the reader is looking along the beam of light; that he or she is permitted to personally enter into the space of the myth within the story.

Stella Gibbons, in her essay, "Imaginative Writing," from the book *Light On Lewis*, gives her view of what Lewis accomplishes in the imaginative sections of *Perelandra*:

The description of *Perelandra* the planet itself can bear the word marvelous in its full dictionary meaning—astonishing, extraordinary, preternatural—for what can be more astonishing than to imagine the soil and scents and noises on a speck of fire millions of miles from Earth so vividly that the reader can actually feel a nostalgia for them, as if they had been personally experienced (89).

Gibbons words, "extraordinary" and "preternatural" are descriptions of what Lewis accomplishes when the reader enters the space of the Perelandrian myth. In an intoxicating description of Ransom's initial experiences on *Perelandra*, the reader,

encountering *Perelandra* from within the beam of light, personally experiences the extraordinary, that Gibbons recalls concerning her reading of the text,

We enter the story as Ransom is firmly struck by the “[e] excessive pleasure which seemed somehow to be communicated to him through all his senses at once” (166). Sitting on the undulating aqua-terra of *Perelandra*, he looks up and sees the golden atmosphere and states: “It was like being at the center of a rainbow, or in a cloud of multi-coloured steam” (167). Ransom was, “. . . dazzled and now for the first time a little frightened” (167). Fear of the numinous, grabs Ransom’s and the reader’s attention and proclaims to them that this adventure, fully realized, is going to contain such things that philosophical discourse cannot describe.

Another awe-inspiring experience takes place when Ransom discovers “. . . great globes of yellow fruit [hanging] from the trees—clustered as toy-balloons are clustered on the back of the balloon—man and about the same size” (170). He first thought the rind impermeable. Then his finger pierces the rind and gives him access to the cold liquid within. Lewis writes:

After a moments hesitation he put the little aperture to his lips. He had meant to extract the smallest, experimental sip, but the first taste put his caution all to flight. It was, of course a taste just as his thirst and hunger had been thirst and hunger. But . . . so different from every other taste it seemed mere pedantry to call it a taste at all. It was like the discovery of a totally new genus of pleasures, something unheard of among men, out of all reckoning, beyond all covenant. For one draught of this on Earth wars would be fought and nations betrayed (170).

In this passage, Ransom and the reader are standing side by side within the spiritual landscape of *Perelandra*. Lewis delights the imagination and brings one into the myth of *Perelandra* and conveys a vast sense of pure, undiluted pleasure. Lewis then describes an unfallen response to such a pleasure:

And yet to repeat a pleasure so intense and almost so spiritual seemed an obvious thing to do. His reason, or what we commonly take to be reason in our world, was all in favour of tasting the miracle again: the childlike innocence of the fruit, the labours he had undergone, the uncertainty of the future, all seemed to commend the action. Yet something seemed opposed to this “reason.” It is difficult to suppose that this opposition came from desire, for what desire would turn from such

deliciousness. But for whatever cause, it appeared to him better not to taste again. Perhaps the experience had been so complete that repetition would be a vulgarity—like asking to hear the same symphony twice in a day (170).

Here sensual desire is depicted as uncorrupted goodness. Again, Ransom and the reader experience more than words. They experience a foreshadowing of complete satisfaction inside the spiritual geography of *Perelandra*. As Harry Blamires wrote in his book, *The Christian Mind*: “Christianity may give the world the impression that our faith . . . resists the physical and would tame the enterprising pursuit of vital experience” (173). But, this is not true to the Holy Scriptures. The Psalmist encourages one to, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8, NIV). Moreover, God, in his infinite wisdom, chose taste as the experience through which one is reminded of Christ’s sacrifice for the sins of man. For, when we taste we make that which we are tasting a part of us. Jesus did not simply give his disciples an explanation of the Eucharist. His desire for them was to taste the bread and wine, and through tasting, to have a sensory experience that made an impact on them far greater than mere rational explanation. One who has contemplated the act of receiving the Eucharist can testify that human reason is unable to explain a believer’s experience of tasting the sacraments. The relationship between bread and wine, two elements that originate in the natural geography of Palestine; and the connection between that which is markedly natural and the supernatural meaning Jesus attaches to the earthly products, requires admission that the Eucharist contains truth and reality that cannot be explained but must be experienced. It appears that Jesus does not want his disciples to see the beam of light; he wants them to see along the beam of light, to enter into the one myth that became fact. To enter into the light and by-pass looking at the beam of light is what Lewis desires for his readers, as they taste the gourd with Ransom. Lewis gives no explanation of what the passage with the gourd means. The reader is free to glean what truths he or she may from this one experience in the spiritual geography of *Perelandra*.

The theme of human response to intense pleasure is found in Lewis’s, *The Last Battle*, when Tirian sees fruit that “. . . was so beautiful that each felt ‘It can’t be meant for me . . . Surely we’re not allowed to pluck it.’” But, Peter, the High King of Narnia, declares, it’s all right “. . . I know what we’re all thinking. But I am quite sure, we needn’t. I’ve a feeling we’ve got to the country where everything is permissible” (156-157). The children have entered Aslan’s country, a place like *Perelandra* where all pleasures are permissible. One may see the passage where Ransom tastes the gourd as

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a type of foreshadowing of the day when the fulfillment of all human desires will be complete in the Kingdom of Christ the Lord; when Jesus will drink from the fruit of the vine in fellowship with all Believers. Looking along the beam of light, we are able to taste the gourd with Ransom and encounter a deep spiritual reality within the myth Lewis weaves.

In his essay "Myth Became Fact," Lewis makes a statement that explains the difference between a passage that allows the reader to look along the beam of light, and the philosophical dialogue we will discuss that forces the reader out of the myth. Lewis writes:

In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction . . . [In enjoying a myth] you are not looking for abstract "meaning" at all . . . You were not knowing, but tasting; but what you were tasting turns out to be a universal principle concretely. When we translate we get abstraction . . . What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality . . . and, therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truths on the abstract level (Hooper 584).

Looking at the beam of light through an abstract philosophical dialogue begins in chapter eight. At this point the reader is outside of the reality of experience that inhabits Lewis's spiritual geography. This excommunication begins with the first conversation between Ransom and Dr. Weston.

After encountering the ecstatic reality of *Perelandra*, Ransom quickly recognizes the extended philosophical dialogue as a conversation that could take place outside the spatiality of myth within *Perelandra*. Lewis declares:

Throughout the conversation that followed, Ransom was filled with a sense of crazy irrelevance. Here were two human beings, thrown together in an alien world under conditions of inconceivable strangeness . . . Was it sane—was it imaginable—that they should find themselves at once engaged in a philosophical argument which might just as well have occurred in a Cambridge combination room? (202).

By reading the philosophical dialogue between Ransom, Weston, and the Queen (who is also referred to as the Green Lady), it becomes apparent that image driven myth teaches and delights but does not require explanation. In contrast, the philosophical dialogue is sustained solely by explanation. This change in style creates the fissure within the storyline and leaves the

reader looking at the beam of light from the outside.

In the thick of the philosophical battle, Ransom racks his brain to explain to the Queen how Weston is using shallow rationalism to trick her into going against the will of God, whom she refers to as "Maledil." Lewis writes:

He [Ransom] was just about to speak but it was too late. Weston's voice anticipated him and tells the Queen that Ransom ". . . does not want you to hear me, because he wants to keep you young. He does not want you to go on to the new fruits that you have never tasted before" (220).

Weston explains to the Queen that it is Ransom who is her true enemy and an enemy of Maledil. He attempts to recall her past experiences of tasting the sensuous fruits of *Perelandra* to support his diabolical argument. Weston's statement: ". . . He does not want you to go on to the new fruits you have never tasted before" is a fiery dart sent into the Queen's malleable mind. But, talking about tasting the fruit in an intellectual debate and actually experiencing the taste of the fruit are very different. It is only by tasting the fruit that one is seeing reality by the beam of light and remains within the spiritual geography of *Perelandra*.

Yet, *Perelandra* is a book that teaches and delights the reader by enticing him or her to enter into the spiritual geography of Lewis's world through word pictures that engulf one's imagination and steal past ones rational defenses. C.S. Lewis wrote spiritual fiction to bring the reader into contact with the numinous. For this union to occur one need not ponder the particles within the beam of light, because the object is to see no beam whatsoever, but rather to allow the beam to fall on the readers eyes and experience the Wholly Other by it. The extended philosophical dialogue within the text denies *Perelandra* a smooth singleness of quality. When the smoothness of the reader's mythic experience is abruptly changed to a philosophical discourse, the bifurcation in the text is apparent. When Lewis the philosopher ends his task of applying human ratiocination to interplanetary matters and Ransom kills the Un-man (Dr. Weston who becomes evil incarnate) in chapter fifteen, the author returns to his occupation as a myth-maker and provides closure to the Perelandrian myth with the "Great Dance" which is one of the finest imaginative events Lewis ever put into words. Speaking for Ransom Lewis writes,

And now by a transition which he did not notice, it seemed that what had begun as speech was turned into sight, or into something that can be remembered only as if it

were seeing. He thought he saw the great Dance “. . . it seemed to be woven out of the intertwining undulation of many cords or bands of light, leaping over and under one another and mutually embraced in arabesques and flower-like subtleties . . . at the zenith of complexity, complexity was eaten up and faded, as a thin white cloud beyond all comprehension, ancient and young as spring . . . drew him with cords of infinite desire into its own stillness. He went up into such quietness; he had the sense of stripping off encumbrances and awakening from trance, and coming to himself. With a gesture of relaxation he looked about him. (231)

Perelandra opens with Ransom returning to Earth in which he gives a limited account to Lewis, the narrator. Lewis commented to Ransom, “‘Of course I realize it’s all rather too vague for you to put into words’ . . . ‘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’” (Lewis 35). Ransom’s comment captures the essence of what Lewis offers his reader when the door to the spiritual geography of the Perelandrian myth is unlocked. The most significant events that become a part of the readers life experience occur when Lewis invites his audience to stand with Ransom inside the beam of light where one can experience the numinous through Lewis’s extra-literary word pictures that make a direct appeal to the supra-rational imagination of his readers. By this formula Lewis gives *Perelandra* a living presence that is unique. *Perelandra* does not simply contain aspects of the numinous and the Wholly Other. Lewis created *Perelandra* to be a literal embodiment of the numinous.

As a devotee who is first committed to accepting all of Lewis’s corpus as works of art to be enjoyed; I am also aware that the job of the critic is to honestly ask the tough questions and with reasonable trepidation comment on how the text struck me as I recite the admonition of Pope who stated: “A perfect judge will read each work of wit / With the same spirit that its author writ.” Lewis’s decision to arrange *Perelandra* with an extended philosophical debate inside of an overwhelmingly successful tapestry of imaginative writing that teaches and delights the reader tends to work against the higher goals of bringing the reader into contact with the numinous on a personal level. While on a cosmic level Lewis contributes to remythologizing the cosmology of our universe that has been emptied of “The Myth That Became Fact” and filled with the myth of unyielding despair. There are some critics who make more out of this critical analysis than there is evidence for. A classic example is Kate O’Brien’s critique of *Perelandra* found in “The Spectator,” (14 May 1943).

She states:

Bravely as Mr. Lewis has assaulted the high and mighty symbols of human hope, serious and imaginative as is his purpose, the things he intends . . . cannot be done at the pace and within the structure of narrative prose. It is a subject for verse, and verse at its most immense . . . Passages in this book which tremble near the absurd because they have to be so much explained, might well have been majestic and beyond question in the simple, inevitable dress of poetry (Hooper 458).

To one’s great surprise Lewis never heeded O’Brien’s admonition. The sum qualities of the book are so grand that they may magnify this blemish. *Perelandra* remains one of Lewis’s great works of fiction. The truths gleaned and the realities experienced are numerous and weighty.

Yet, it is not enough to simply comprehend that seeing by the beam of light and looking at the beam are different experiences. The cornerstone of the text is the fact that the magic Lewis creates in *Perelandra* occurs on *Perelandra* where the Wholly Other lives and breaths. The reader is transported to the spiritual geography of *Perelandra* through the power of image-driven myth; and myth must be encountered by stepping into that place where one no longer sees the beam of light at all but rather is pulled into the light the beam provides. By this process one can span the spiritual geography of Lewis’s far off planet and help us to navigate the spiritual geography we encounter each day. For the perspective of our world from *Perelandra* is quite insightful.

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