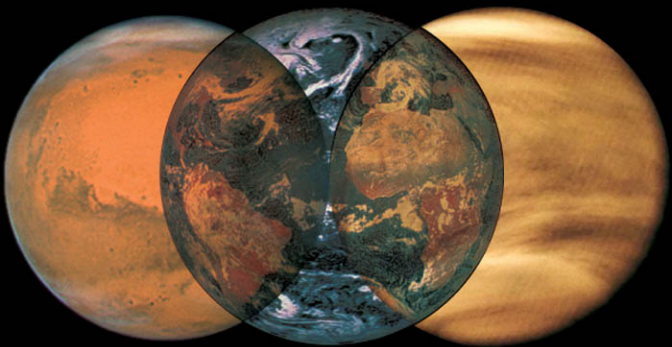


C. S. LEWIS *on the final frontier*

SCIENCE *and the* SUPERNATURAL *in the* SPACE TRILOGY



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Science and the Supernatural  
in the Space Trilogy

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Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

*To my parents,  
Rose and Leonard Schwartz*

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“that by Wisdom made the heavens . . .”

—*Psalm 136*

“ . . . from so simple a beginning endless forms most  
beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being,  
evolved.”

—*The Origin of Species*

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## Acknowledgments

In the final chapter of *Perelandra*, the king of this new and rapidly evolving paradise acknowledges that his sovereignty devolves upon him as a “gift” from others: “All is gift. . . . Through many hands, enriched with many different kinds of love and labour, the gift comes to me. It is the Law. The best fruits are plucked for each by some hand that is not his own.” Many hands that are not my own have contributed to this book, and my debts are so extensive that it has become difficult to think of myself as the “author” in any conventional sense of the term. This study began and ended with my family. It was launched by my adolescent son, Nathaniel, whose childhood delight in *The Chronicles of Narnia* led him to the Space Trilogy, and his enthusiasm in turn led me back to Lewis’s interplanetary romances for the first time in many years. It concluded, and indeed has been sustained all along, by my wife, Marion, who not only listened to often inchoate efforts to articulate issues and explanations but also seemed a step or two ahead of me at every turn. From them, and from the good humor and editorial assistance of my daughter Caroline, “the gift comes to me.”

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the rest of the Trilogy. Robert Snyder, editor emeritus of *Christianity and Literature*, which published that first essay, provided excellent critical and editorial advice and offered similar encouragement to continue on. I owe an intellectual debt to Doris T. Myers, whose *C. S. Lewis in Context* (1994) departed from the prevailing image of the self-styled “dinosaur” and demonstrated the fruits of situating Lewis in the maelstrom of modern intellectual, social, and cultural life. I’m also grateful to David Downing for some sharp observations on the *Perelandra* article; to Dale Nelson for crucial biographical and bibliographical assistance at a later stage of the enterprise; to Charles Huttar for his meticulous analysis of the completed manuscript; and to Alan Jacobs for his generous reading as I neared the home stretch. A special salute to Christopher Mitchell and Marjorie Mead of the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, where most of the research for this book was conducted. Their hospitality, along with the unflagging efficiency and courtesy of their student assistants, transformed the long hours in the archives into an unforgettable pleasure.

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# Abbreviations

Page numbers throughout refer to the Scribner trade paperback editions of the Space Trilogy (2003). For those reading different editions, see Appendix B: Tables for Converting Page References to Chapter Numbers. Appendix B also contains similar conversion tables for longer apologetical works—*Mere Christianity*, *Miracles*, *The Problem of Pain*—and for “The Dark Tower.”

<i>AM</i>	<i>The Abolition of Man</i>
<i>AMR</i>	<i>All My Road Before Me</i>
<i>CR</i>	<i>Christian Reflections</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Dymmer</i>
<i>DI</i>	<i>The Discarded Image</i>
<i>DT</i>	<i>The Dark Tower and Other Stories</i>
<i>ELSC</i>	<i>English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama</i>
<i>GD</i>	<i>The Great Divorce</i>
<i>GID</i>	<i>God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics</i>
<i>GO</i>	<i>A Grief Observed</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>Letters</i> [3-volume set; <i>L I</i> , <i>L II</i> , or <i>L III</i> ]
<i>LM</i>	<i>Letters to Malcolm</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Miracles</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Mere Christianity</i>
<i>OS</i>	<i>On Stories and Other Essays on Literature</i>
<i>OSP</i>	<i>Out of the Silent Planet</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Perelandra</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Problem of Pain</i>

<i>PPL</i>	<i>A Preface to 'Paradise Lost'</i>
<i>RP</i>	<i>Reflections on the Psalms</i>
<i>SJ</i>	<i>Surprised by Joy</i>
<i>SLE</i>	<i>Selected Literary Essays</i>
<i>THS</i>	<i>That Hideous Strength</i>
<i>WG</i>	<i>The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses</i>
<i>WLN</i>	<i>The World's Last Night and Other Essays</i>

## C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier

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# Introduction

## Darwin in Deep Heaven

Supposition . . . presupposes that the actual or real fact is not the whole of reality. It implies that there are other spheres, or other provinces of the same sphere, all connected in a wider universe.

—F. H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality*

In the mind of the fallen Archon under whom our planet groans, the memory of Deep Heaven and the gods with whom he once consorted is still alive. Nay, in the very matter of our world, the traces of the celestial commonwealth are not quite lost.

—C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*

Before there was *Narnia* there were the interplanetary romances, commonly known as the “Space” or “Ransom” Trilogy. C. S. Lewis’s unlikely hero, Elwin Ransom—a Cambridge philologist turned cosmic warrior—may never attain the superstar status of the Pevensie children or see his tales transformed by the magic of the marketplace into a lucrative corporate franchise. The series in which he stars—*Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945)—occupies a respectable niche in the annals of modern science fiction. But at the start of the new millennium, the Space Trilogy owes much of its resilient shelf life to the reflective glow of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956) and to its author’s enduring

reputation as the preeminent religious apologist of our times. When Ransom first appeared on the scene, Clive Staples Lewis was a forty-ish academic unknown beyond the lecture halls of Oxford and the compact company of scholars acquainted with *The Allegory of Love* (1936), his first major study of Medieval and Renaissance literature. By the time of Ransom's final farewell in 1945, Lewis was a household name in Britain and something of a celebrity in the rest of the English-speaking world. His fame was fueled by a daunting mélange of fiction, lively and inventive apologetics, engaging literary criticism (not yet an oxymoron), and above all, by the four series of immensely popular radio broadcasts (1941–1944)—later assembled into *Mere Christianity* (1952)—which unexpectedly captured the pulse of an embattled nation. In the decade following Ransom's debut, there appeared in rapid succession *The Problem of Pain* (1940), the much-admired *Screwtape Letters* (1942), *Broadcast Talks* (1942, the print version of the first and second radio series), *A Preface to 'Paradise Lost'* (1942), *Christian Behaviour* (1943, the third set of radio talks), *Peregrandra* (1943), *The Abolition of Man* (1943), *Beyond Personality* (1944, the final set of broadcasts), *That Hideous Strength* (1945), *The Great Divorce* (1946), and *Miracles* (1947), in addition to some notable essays and other writings. By the close of these *anni mirabili* Elwin Ransom had been dispatched to his celestial resting place, but his creator was sitting on the cover of *Time* magazine (September 8, 1947, with his head slightly angled toward the protective wing of a dove on one side, his more visible ear slyly exposed to a pitch-forked tempter on the other). *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—first of the *Narnia* chronicles—was still a distant gleam on the horizon.

Lewis's fighting philologist was conceived in an atmosphere of looming international crisis, and however far he travels from his own planet, the issues surrounding the causes, conduct, and consequences of the Second World War are never far from the surface. Ransom's first adventure, *Out of the Silent Planet*, was published in September 1938, three weeks prior to Neville Chamberlain's infamous appeasement of Hitler at Munich, and it is no accident that most of the

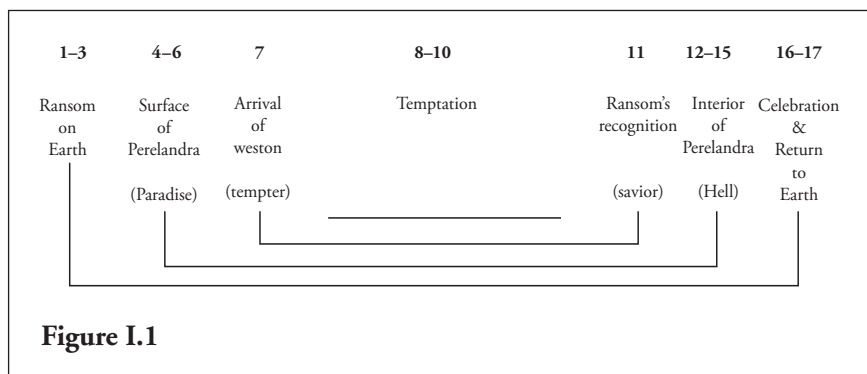
novel takes place on the planet named for the god of war. Abducted seemingly by chance and taken to Mars (Malacandra) by a pair of cosmic imperialists, Ransom spends the first part of the narrative struggling with the terrors, real and imaginary, that threaten to engulf him. Lewis's peace-loving protagonist is not a committed pacifist, as were many in the thirties, but Ransom's experience on Mars seems calculated to restore confidence in his own courage, which has never recovered from the traumas of the First World War, and to promote "the *good* element in the martial spirit, the discipline and freedom from anxiety" (*L II*, 702, 1/31/46), which will be required for the all-but-inevitable struggle ahead. Twelve months later hostilities commenced, and by the time of Ransom's next appearance in *Peregrandra*, the war had been raging for nearly four years, its outcome still in doubt. In his new role, a more self-assured Ransom travels to a freshly minted creation on Venus (Perelandra) and primes himself for a Christlike battle of wits with the powers of evil, echoing Milton's elaboration of the biblical temptation in the wilderness in *Paradise Regained*. But Lewis turns the tables on his hero, who discovers that words and wisdom will not suffice and slowly progresses toward the horrifying realization that he has been called upon to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the Evil One himself. The author's decision to resolve the conflict in this manner—an open attempt to justify, if not sanctify, the recourse to arms—remains a disturbing aspect of the novel even to sympathetic readers who assent to the position it supports. So does the blood-soaked resolution of Ransom's last adventure, *That Hideous Strength*, which appeared in print one week prior to the cataclysmic events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and portrays the rise and fall of a totalitarian conspiracy on our own planet. Once again, few of Lewis's readers dispute the justice of the cause, but many never fail to wince at the level of divinely sanctioned violence visited on the architects of the New Leviathan. In light of such scenes, Lewis is often accused of harboring an anachronistic (if not boyishly sadistic) ideal of Christian knighthood scandalously out of place in the modern world. But whether or not we are satisfied

by Lewis's management of the moral and religious issues he raises in these war-torn novels, Elwin Ransom's three-volume transformation from terrified victim to anointed guardian of the planet bears the unmistakable imprint of the violent conditions of the time.

It is not physical but ideological warfare, however, that dominates the Space Trilogy and ultimately encompasses the war itself. Proceeding from Mars and Venus to the final showdown on our own planet, each new installment examines another facet of the seemingly impassable conflict between Christian tradition and the evolutionary or "developmental" tendencies of modern thought. In his contemporaneous essays Lewis states repeatedly that his target is not the biological theory of evolution, which he regards as a "genuine scientific hypothesis" ("Funeral of a Great Myth" *CR* 83), but the more deep-seated conceptual paradigm, well established by the time of Darwin's monumental *Origin of Species* (1859), which transferred the focal point of creation from a transcendent God to the progressive development of Man. For the most part Lewis is less concerned with the prospect of subhuman ancestry than with a conceptual apparatus that consigns other human beings to subhuman status, or summons up an "evolutionary imperative" to legitimate the suspension of time-honored ethical norms. These issues were increasingly acute in the early twentieth century, when projects for the "transformation of humanity" turned from speculative fictions into real-life legislative agendas for the improvement of the species, and at their most extreme, into lethal crusades to secure the future of the evolutionary process itself. Seen from this vantage point the war against Nazi aggression was not simply a conflict between rival nations in a traditionally fractious continent but a struggle over the very way in which we conceive of human nature and its relations to the rest of the natural order. The outcome of the war drastically altered the political map of the planet, but in setting Ransom's final battle in postwar England, Lewis makes it clear that the ideological issues at stake in the conflict would not disappear with the demise of fascism. Indeed, they are very much with us today. The capac-

ity for the biotechnical transformation of humanity—driven by the extraordinary developments in genetic, robotic, information, and nanotechnologies—increases on an almost daily basis, and even if (for now) we in the West are somewhat less haunted by the specter of state-enforced eugenics, it seems as though the major concerns of the Space Trilogy are becoming ever more ominous as we move further into the twenty-first century.

The following chapters are designed to accompany readers through each of Elwin Ransom's adventures and to offer some reflections on the series as a whole, including the unfinished story posthumously published as *The Dark Tower* (see Appendix A). They draw liberally on earlier full-length studies of the Trilogy—by Martha Sammons (1980), David Downing (1992), and Jared Lobdell (2004)—and on the vast stream of other commentary that shows no sign of exhaustion nearly a half-century after the author's death.<sup>1</sup> This excursion through the Space Trilogy, however, proceeds from three distinctive premises, which account for the organization of its individual chapters and for their prevailing points of view. The first premise issues from the observation that the three novels share the same internal configuration (outlined below), and this common structure sheds light not only on each individual novel but also on the relationships between them. The second premise, which requires some historical reconstruction, calls attention to significant changes in the representation of the modern evolutionary model as the series proceeds from one novel to the next. Each of the three books examines the dire consequences of the developmental paradigm, but over the course of the Trilogy the paradigm itself develops, or in a sense ascends, from the “materialist” assumptions of the first story to the presumably higher “organic” or “vitalist” level of the sequel, and then mutates once again into a “spiritual” principle in the finale. The third premise, which issues from the second, is grounded in the perception that each of the providentially governed communities with which Ransom is associated—the “unfallen” Mars and Venus in the first two novels, and their terrestrial counterpart, the manor of St. Anne's, in the finale—is constructed



**Figure I.1**

not as the polar opposite but the transfiguration or “working-up” (*RP* 112) of the specific phase of the evolutionary model to which it stands opposed. As we shall see, this final and most complex premise, which is also more consistent with Lewis’s Augustinian view that “bad things are good things perverted” (*PPL* 66), entails a significant departure from the traditional approach to these novels. Taken together, these three working tenets suggest that the Space Trilogy, which began with no evident master plan and developed gradually over a period of years, is a more integrated and systematically organized series than is generally assumed. More important, they indicate that contrary to Lewis’s self-styled image as an intellectual “dinosaur” stranded in the modern world (“*De Descriptione Temporum*” *SLE* 13), the Space Trilogy and its author are at once deeply engaged with the modern intellectual revolution and eager to explore some of the pioneering insights that arose in its wake.

## Structure

Ransom’s three adventures share a precise internal symmetry. Scholars have long known that the seventeen chapters of *Perelandra* form a tightly knit unit. Although there are no formal indicators other than

chapter numbers, the first part of the novel (chapters 1–7) may be divided into three discrete sections, which proceed toward a climactic center—the temptation scene (chapters 8–10)—followed by another seven-chapter sequence (chapters 11–17) that mirrors the tripartite division of the first seven chapters. On an initial reading we cannot discern this pattern until well into the second half of the novel (if we do so at all), but from a bird’s eye view what emerges is a structure comprised of a central core (chapters 8–10) surrounded by a balanced series of frames: This “ring” structure, in which the later sections of the work circle back to the beginning, is by no means unique to Lewis.<sup>2</sup> But if we keep this formation in mind as we read the novel, we will catch some of the notable shifts in focus as we progress from section to section; and once we’ve crossed the central divide (chapters 8–10) we can appreciate the significant and often extensive network of references through which each successive section in the second half echoes and answers to its counterpart in the first.

No such scholarly consensus exists on the other two novels, which also lack any structural markers other than chapter numbers (though the chapters have titles in the final book). One of the working principles of this study is that *Out of the Silent Planet* and *That Hideous Strength* possess the same internal configuration as *Perelandra*, and conceiving them in this manner yields equally rewarding results. Hence each of the following chapters is divided into segments that reflect the section-by-section development of the novel it examines (see the figures on pp. 28, 66, and 98). This arrangement enables us to follow the narrative through its various twists and turns in each individual volume and to identify some striking similarities in the corresponding sections of consecutive volumes. Many of these correspondences will be identified along the way, but in the conclusion we will examine a compelling instance of this multivolume symmetry: at the identical point in all three novels the previously passive protagonist is placed in a situation that requires personal decision, a commitment to violent action, and a reckoning with the prospect of death. As we shall see, these closely related scenes also form a