

Wolfe, Judith and Brendan Wolfe. *C. S. Lewis's Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2013. xvii + 160 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1-60635-183-3. \$45.00.

As a creator of other worlds, C. S. Lewis is better known for his epic *Chronicles of Narnia* series than for the science fiction novels that make up his “Space Trilogy” (*Out of the Silent Planet* [1938], *Perelandra* [1943], and *That Hideous Strength* [1945]). Modern readers are also more likely to encounter Lewis’s writing in the form of his imaginative fiction, even though he produced a substantial amount of scholarly and theological works. Yet, as this new collection of essays edited by Judith and Brendan Wolfe suggests, Lewis’s innovative studies and treatises on a diverse range of subjects—medieval and Renaissance literature, medieval cosmology, philology, modern science, and Christianity—can enrich our understanding of his novels through comparative study. In *Perelandra*, the second novel of the trilogy, in which the philologist Elwin Ransom is transported to Venus, many of Lewis’s ideas about morality and man’s place in the universe attuned themselves to, and rethought, trends in science fiction, such as interplanetary travel. This new publication by Wolfe and Wolfe, sensitive to the vast range of Lewis’s learning and the influence it had on *Perelandra*, assembles scholars from a variety of disciplines in order to address the ways in which the novel “synthesizes” traditions of myth and morality.

Essay contributions found in this collection hail from different backgrounds and have been arranged with care. The book is split into two major parts. Part One, “The Perelandran Cosmos,” contains essays concerned with how Lewis reimagined traditions of cosmology, classical mythology, and Christianity in *Perelandra*. Part Two, “Morality and Meaning in *Perelandra*,” turns to the novel’s theological significance, and to the ways in which it deals with the nature of sin and free will. This division allows the reader of the collection to embark on a journey in which Part Two develops many of the readings and discussions established in Part One, moving towards deeper philosophical views of *Perelandra* (and of life) as the book progresses.

The disciplines of theology, philosophy, and literary criticism (well represented in this collection) inevitably produce different writing styles and bring alternative agendas to their discussion of a literary text. Wolfe and Wolfe, however, are to be complimented on avoiding jarring clashes of viewpoint or style across the book (and also for making sure there are no repetitions—another risk that arises when bringing together essays around a sole work of fiction). If anything, the focus on the moral and theological elements of Lewis’s novel outweighs close literary analysis. I suspect that this is not the last book-length study of Lewis’s seminal work we will see however. This affordable and readable collection has opened a gateway for future scholarship, and literary stud-

ies of *Perelandra* in particular, by unraveling and addressing many of its obscure symbols and themes.

Parts One and Two are preceded by Judith Wolfe's vivid and concise introductory assessment of "The Scope and Vision of this Study," and by one of the collection's most endearing inclusions, Walter Hooper's reflections on his conversations with Lewis about *Perelandra* ("C. S. Lewis and the Anthropological Approach"). Hooper reveals that Lewis had firm ideas about reading and receiving narrative texts: first and foremost, he claimed, a text must be allowed to work on the reader "in its own way," not as something we have been told it is, or as something drawing on a particular source. Thus, as Judith Wolfe states earlier in her Introduction, "to read *Perelandra* solely through one set of sources is to import (now outdated) anthropological methods into literary study, and to distort the object of enquiry from the start" (ix).

Hooper's essay and Wolfe's Introduction effectively set the tone for the studies that are to follow. Wolfe's piece is vital because of the way it sets out the book's agenda, arguing persuasively that cross-disciplinary research is required for an improved assessment of how and why Lewis reimagined the cosmos, while also suggesting that Lewis's fictional works would benefit if read in light of his scholarship.

The Introduction takes off with a discussion of world building and correctly notes that Lewis's vision of Venus does not disappear into the background so the religious story takes precedence, but "inflect[s] Lewis's entire rendering of that story" (ix). But Wolfe mentions *Perelandra*'s complicated relationship with the science fiction only briefly, noting that Lewis deemed a spiritual dimension vital to new writing within that genre. There are a few references to *Perelandra* as science fiction throughout the collection. The final essay by Michael Travers, "Free to Fall: The Moral Ground of Events on *Perelandra*," begins by mentioning Lewis's idea that the "Space Trilogy" should be understood as a "subspecies of the genre of science fiction" (144) because, Travers notes, Lewis seeks to create other worlds and lives that "enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience" (Lewis's words, from *On Science Fiction*, quoted by Travers on page 144). While this is a fair point, Travers does not come back to, or get involved with, science fiction, for his essay is one that addresses Lewis's theory that the Fall resulted from a free act of sin, which it does very well. But, as the last outpost, the final essay reminds us that the collection as a whole, while in conception perhaps never intending or wishing to do so, remains silent about whether or not *Perelandra* can be read as science fiction at all, and about where it stands in the history of the genre.

That debate, though, is certainly one worth having because Lewis's interplanetary novel challenged the science fiction of his time by setting his story within a medieval model of the cosmos. This bold move gave new meaning to an outer space that modern science had reduced to a cold vacuum. The

Inklings may have become synonymous with the fantasy genre, but Lewis's conception of *Perelandra* is indicative of how this important literary group also sought to create innovative science fiction stories through such recourse to medieval thought.

Lewis's use and reinvention of a medieval model of the cosmos in *Perelandra* is addressed elsewhere in this collection. Nikolay Epplée's well-researched essay, "The Center and the Rim," elegantly outlines the relationship between Lewis's *The Discarded Image* (1964), which discussed how medieval writers envisioned a theocentric cosmos, and *Perelandra*, noting that Lewis peculiarly aligned science fiction and theology (although, again, the wider ramifications of this in relation to definitions of sf are avoided). This essay stands as the apex of the editors' endeavor to bring comparative studies of Lewis's scholarship and fiction to the fore.

No study of Lewis would be complete without inclusion or reference to Michael Ward, whose study of the Narnia books and medieval cosmology revolutionized Lewis scholarship and paved the way for Epplée's contribution. Ward's essay in this collection, "Lewis's Imaginative Path to *Perelandra*," opens Part One and argues that one of the major themes of *Perelandra* is "plentitude." Ward provides a sophisticated analysis of the imagery of Venus in the novel, and the role of classical myth in Lewis's life and works.

These exceptional comparative studies bring me to one final and minor quibble: the concept or image of the "medieval" period evoked by the collection as a whole. In addition to Epplée and Ward, the editors have assembled scholars interested in modern literature, literary theory, and theology. Medieval literature is no doubt peripheral to the research of these contributors (and perhaps even to their research on Lewis). As might be expected from a study of this kind, there are different levels of knowledge about the medieval period here that lead to one or two inconsistencies across the book. Monika Hilder's otherwise impressive essay about gender in *Perelandra* (a game-changer in that it convincingly turns the tables on longstanding assumptions about Lewis as a man with sexist views, detailing how *Perelandra* subverts gender roles "typically understood as oppressive" [70]) makes a rather generalizing statement about "feudalism." Discussing "the Great Dance" that takes place at the end of *Perelandra*, in which all of Creation intertwines and all things are given significance and freedom because of their obedience to God, Hilder writes that "in feudalism, as in its metaphor of the 'chain of being', roles are defined, identity is prescribed, and obedience is a key virtue" (77). The statement holds relatively true, but one might ask what, or what kind, of "feudalism" is meant here, and if it is feasible to equate "feudalism" with the long medieval period, or whether that isolates the period and its literature to the realm distant from science and science fiction (Lewis addressed similar problems arising from generalizations about the medieval period in his *Studies in Medieval and*

Renaissance Literature [1966]). Sanford's Schwartz's "A Modern View of the Space Trilogy" presents a striking enquiry into Lewis's knowledge and creative responses to early twentieth-century theories of evolution, including those of Henri Bergson (1849-1951). This essay is to be praised for the acerbic way it reveals how Lewis's engagement with models of evolution is often overlooked. However, Schwartz's assumption that "it is well known that Lewis endows his worlds on Mars and Venus with attributes drawn from the medieval model of the cosmos" (56) is not altogether true for, as this collection itself has inexplicitly suggested, just *how* and *why* Lewis did this are questions in need of further study. If medieval ideas about the cosmos are vital to an understanding of *Perelandra* (and there is no doubt they are: we must not forget that Lewis was a professional medievalist), then perhaps the inclusion of more medievalists in a study of Lewis's novel is necessary.

Still, this collection must be praised for paving the way for interdisciplinary pursuits concerning Lewis's "Space Trilogy." This book would serve scholars of Lewis interested in the way his writings on morality and myth informed his fiction, but would also be of interest to non-academic readers searching for explanations of *Perelandra*'s sensational imagery and philosophical dialogue. The editors should be complimented for what they have achieved: a varied and informative collection of essays on one of Lewis's most important works, and a flight towards what I hope is further popular and scholarly appreciation of Lewis's "Space Trilogy" and its largely misunderstood reinvention of the science fiction genre.

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