

UNROLLING THE BOOK AGAIN:  
C.S. LEWIS ON THE EFFICACY OF LANGUAGE  
IN *PERELANDRA* AND *TILL WE HAVE FACES*

by

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(Under the Direction of Jonathan Evans)

ABSTRACT

In his *Studies in Words*, C.S. Lewis represents language as “important and effective” in certain matters of communication, yet sometimes-defective in others. His collected letters corroborate this complex position, also indicating certain shifts in Lewis’s view on the capability of word and story to represent truth accurately. The impetus for these shifts in perspective has been explained as specific interactions with J.R.R. Tolkien, among other colleagues; these discussions established Lewis’s belief in the “truth” of myth, and most importantly of the Christian myth. The question then raised concerns the resulting shift in and development of Lewis’s views on language, and to what extent his belief in true myth as meta-narrative influenced this development. An investigation of the novels *Perelandra* and *Till We Have Faces* demonstrates the conclusions at which Lewis arrived regarding the capability of language to communicate meaning, and also illuminates the connections between his position on language and his view of the essential connection between reality and myth.

INDEX WORDS: C.S. Lewis, Language, Myth, Meaning, Meta-narrative, *Perelandra*, Story, *Till We Have Faces*, Tolkien,

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B.S.E.D., The University of Georgia, 2000

M.A., The University of Georgia, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2003

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## INTRODUCTION: LEWIS ON WORD, LANGUAGE, AND STORY

In the concluding chapters of *Surprised by Joy*, the autobiographical account of his conversion from atheism to theism, C.S. Lewis addresses the influence of his friendship with J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson on his developing spiritual views. He indicates that these two men gave him “much help in getting over the last stile” between his own atheistic philosophies and his ensuing theistic belief system (207). In a 1939 letter to his brother, Warnie, Lewis describes a discovery in connection with Tolkien and Dyson that effected the change in his perspective from the “days when [he] had . . . no conception of what was at the center of [books]” (*Letters* 331).

Identified as the “Christian revelation” and the catalyst for Lewis’s conversion of perspective on stories, this “discovery” verifies Humphrey Carpenter’s account of Lewis’s September 19, 1931, discussion with the two men, in which he began to be convinced that the myths and stories he had loved since childhood were “*not*,” in fact, “*lies*” (*Letters* 331; Carpenter 43). In this conversation that was so crucial to Lewis’s developing ideas of story and truth, the key point of discussion was the nature of myths: were they lies, though “beautiful and moving,” as Lewis asserted, or, on the contrary, did they “express fragments of . . . eternal truth,” as Tolkien propounded? (43, 44).

Although Lewis held the initial perspective that fairy-stories and myths were nothing more than “lies and therefore worthless, even though ‘breathed through silver,’ ” the three men continued later to converse “on Christianity” in connection with myth and

story, and Lewis began to connect his previous experience of “myth[s] as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond [his] grasp” with the Christian myth of the “dying and reviving god” (“Mythopoeia” 85; *Letters* 287, 288). Lewis later explains that “Dyson and Tolkien showed [him]” that the “story of Christ is simply a true myth,” conveying his recognition that “If ever a myth had become fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like” the Christian story (*Letters* 288; *Surprised* 227).

The significance of this realization for Lewis’s views on literature and language was that he at once believed the “doings of God in the Christian story” not only “*really happened*,” but also “work on us in the same way as . . . other [myths],” and that the true myth—“God’s myth”—is also “express[ed]” in “Pagan stories . . . through the minds of poets” (*Letters* 289). Lewis subsequently shifted from disbelief in significant meaning behind the stories of his childhood to confidence that the “perfect myth” of Christianity is the actual meta-narrative underlying these books he so loved (“Myth” 67). Further, for Lewis, this same master story joins the meaning at the core of these books to the “main tide of human existence” (“Myth” 66, *Letters* 331). His discussion with Tolkien and Dyson thus served as an impetus for the development in his perspective of the intimate relationship between truth and story, and as the beginning of his thought that, because of this centrally true myth, the other myths he so loved are fortunately not “lies and therefore worthless” (“Mythopoeia” 85).

It would be useful at this point to provide a clear definition of the terms meta-narrative and master story, as they will be used throughout the following discussion of Lewis’s works. As earlier stated, Lewis viewed the Christian story as the narrative—the true myth—that joins the central meaning of stories and myths to the “main tide of

human existence” (*Letters* 331). In “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien describes the same myth as the “supreme” story in which “Legend and History have met and fused” (180). For Lewis and Tolkien, then, the meta-narrative is the central and true story that infuses other stories with “underlying reality [and] truth” and, in so doing, validates these other narratives (178). Specifically, both writers saw the Christian story as this master narrative that underlies the tales of mythology and history.

As “myth . . . [became] fact” and “Histories” were confirmed as records of reality in this way for Lewis, the 1931 conversation serves even more significantly as a turning point in Lewis’s personal and professional life regarding his views of word and language. While his theological and literary perspective simultaneously changed on a large scale, concerning whole myths and stories, Lewis’s views on language itself were now in line with his early and developing views of words as inherently significant and meaningful. These early views on language are expressed in his autobiography, as his love of myth led to an early fascination with words themselves. Lewis gives an account of “beginning to think in Greek” while learning languages as a child, describing his realization as a young boy that individual words do not merely indicate the object they describe, or even represent “one another,” but actually “mean a thing”: i.e., they are somehow inextricably and essentially connected to the actual object they define (*Surprised* 135).

Following his discussion with Tolkien and Dyson, then, the master story that contributed significance to Lewis’s beloved stories, in connection with these early experiences with language, began to infuse individual words with even greater meaning, making any word-crafting endeavor on the part of the individual “worth doing” (*Letters* 456). Similarly, in his poem “Mythopoeia,” Tolkien connects the works of past “legend-



makers” and “sub-creator[s]” with the actual creation and underlying story of the world (Tree 88, 87). In the same way, he acknowledges significance in individual words, defining them not as mere arbitrary definitions, but as “response[s] of those” people who, in drawing “Great powers . . . out of themselves,” also connected individual word with reality (86). In the same way, Lewis’s understanding of story as inherently meaningful reflects his earlier view of words and language as essentially meaningful in their connection to particular objects and things. Through his conversion to belief in the Master Story, Lewis thus sees words themselves as augmented in significance by the existence of a mythic meta-narrative that is foundational to both world and literature.

This drastic change in Lewis’s beliefs regarding story and language raises further questions about the efficacy of language to communicate intended meaning. The recent round of criticism (within the past fifteen years) concerning Lewis’s theories about language both in his fiction and in his critical works on words addresses this question in roundabout ways, and for the most part corroborates Lewis’s statements concerning his intentions regarding language. In his essay “C.S. Lewis as a Student of Words,” Michael A. Covington conveys the important place Lewis’s work with language holds within twentieth century literary theory, positing that Lewis’s *Studies in Words* “deserves to be . . . known as an important theoretical challenge to the then still influential methodology of New Criticism” (29). Covington counters some of the initial negative criticism (though it certainly wasn’t all negative) that Lewis’s work received upon publication, arguing against responses that in his study of the changes in language Lewis is saying nothing more, or something worse, than has already been stated by “scholars before him” (30). He instead explains that Lewis uses his own claims on language to “implicitly” counter,

and to counter successfully, the New Critics' position that "all the senses and associations of a word enter at once into its effect in a poem" (37, 39). According to Covington, Lewis instead successfully "relies on the insulating power of the context" of the poem to lend particular sense to the word (39).

Verlyn Flieger builds on this affirmation of Lewis's take on words, addressing the writer's actual use of language, the "known," to "express the unknown," which is experience: in the critic's own words, Lewis "explore[s] and illustrate[s] the interdependence of language and experience" in his space trilogy to "validate the mythos of Christianity" (42). Flieger addresses Lewis's "approach to language" in *Perelandra*, as well as in the other space novels, as the "recognition that [language] is agent as well as medium" of recognizing, or apprehending, the realities of various experiences (43). For Lewis, language is the means by which experience is both understood and defined. In "The Epistemology of C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*," Robert Holyer expands on this view of Lewis's use of language as a powerful medium in *Till We Have Faces*, while Donald E. Glover balances this appreciation for the way Lewis addresses language by presenting a view of Lewis as a storyteller who demonstrates "conscious concern with the pitfalls of his own art form" (172). Though Glover chiefly deals with the larger art of storytelling and narrative-making, and the personal misunderstandings or "agenda[s]" that might "creep in and destroy the delicate balance between the known truth and how we tell it," he recognizes that Lewis is aware of the limitations as well as the strengths of story. Lewis seems aware, as well, that—word and story being inextricably entwined—language is also subject to certain limitations (172).

Gregory Wolfe, however, posits that in his endeavor to raise up the power and ability of poetic language by claiming “art, philosophy, and poetry” as essential vehicles in “account[ing] for human nature,” Lewis does not successfully remove himself from Platonist theories (61). According to Wolfe, Lewis presents language in his space trilogy as “totally fallen and corrupted” in such a way that it is not merely a “‘bent’ form of a language that was once in contact with spiritual reality,” but instead “has no intrinsic relationship with the transcendent” (74, 75). In this way, Wolfe criticizes Lewis’s seeming attempts to reconcile the “modern crisis” of the language of science’s exclusive claim to the understanding and communication of reality. However, despite his concern with the “Platonic contradictions about language in the trilogy,” he does also acknowledge Lewis’s “acute” contribution in the space trilogy to the matter of the historical “los[s] and recover[y]” of meaning in words as raised earlier by Owen Barfield (75). Mara E. Donaldson also argues against a complete discounting of Lewis’s work on language due to seeming Platonist contradictions, countering that, though these are sometimes present in his writings, his own distinction between “story as Logos” and “story as Poiema” allow him—at least somewhat successfully—to connect the transcendent in his stories (Poiema) with the “meaning[ful] . . . world” and factual matter (Logos) (158, 170, 168).

An investigation of Lewis’s correspondence, as well as a look at his *Studies in Words*, indicates that his own stated perspective on language’s sufficiency to convey meaning, and ultimately truth, developed in several different ways over the course of his career. On the one hand, mid-life letters to both friends and family indicate a growing recognition that books and language are charged with more meaning than he had realized

earlier. In this way, after “embrac[ing] the Christian revelation,” Lewis declares surprise and delight to his brother at the recognition, that there is significant meaning “at the center of” the “books” he had previously read (*Letters* 331). By the end of his life, this sufficiency of language to represent certain truths meant that words for Lewis were “important and effective, “and “wholly legitimate” in certain matters of communication (314).

However, Lewis does recognize an increasing frustration regarding the use of language in an attempt to “apply” or convey “literal meaning” (*Letters* 296). In a letter to his brother, he describes the “painful myster[y]” of language’s losing meaning as it “progress[es] from being very particular to very general,” suggesting that language is perhaps never able to convey meaning ideally or perfectly (296). He explains that as we attempt to attain precise representation in using language, we lose the “traces of the dream,” which are essential to the “concrete experience” of understanding the meaning of the thing (296). In this way, Lewis presents language as in some ways limited, unable to at once convey the specific thing or experience, and at the same time step back to explain, or “apply the literal meaning” to that experience (296); when it attempts to do so, he says, we move “so far away from real things that [our words] really say nothing” (296). Early on, in a young adult letter to a friend, he acknowledges similar limitations in language. Though later he describes poetry as one of the “only language[s] . . . which still [has] traces of the dream in [it],” he also asserts that poetry is only able to “express [conscious] feeling that can be analyzed,” while, for example, “music is the highest of the arts,” conveying the “hundreds of thoughts and feelings that can’t . . . be put into words” (*Collected Letters* 196, 296).

This attitude toward the limitations of language, alongside his developing certainty that myths and stories do contain significant meaning, seems to have remained consistent throughout his career; in the final chapter of *Studies in Words*, written toward the end of his life, Lewis explicitly states that language “communicates” certain things “so badly” that they are better expressed through “other medium[s]” of drawing or “pantomimic gestures” (313). Lewis provides personal evidence of this “defective . . . instrument” of language, acknowledging in later letters to friends the nearly “impossible” task of crafting words to express the thoughts and concepts in his mind (*Studies* 314; *Letters* 456). He thus gives evidence of his own difficulties as a writer, and also passes along advice to his students that “a writer” is “lucky if, out of a dozen books, one or two sentences . . . come near to getting” the intended idea “across” (*Letters* 456).

However, Lewis clearly does not believe that the shortcomings of language and words render the act of writing futile, as he encourages these same students to persevere in “trying to describe the *thing*” that is so difficult to convert to words “all [their] li[ves]” (*Letters* 456). In his own attempt to create “the ‘Eve’ of [Venus]” in *Perelandra*, he further and significantly expresses his conviction that “if one can get even a fraction of it into words it is worth doing” (*Letters* 456). This sentiment is echoed again, as in his essay “On Stories” he concedes that the means by which the form of story is written is “often at war with the end,” but concludes nonetheless that the thing “we are always trying to catch” in stories is “sometimes done—or very, very nearly done, and so the crafting of words to create story is, again, an “effort . . . well worth making” (19-20, 21).

Lewis’s very endeavor to study the “semantic relations” of words with the purpose of “facilitat[ing] . . . a more accurate reading of old books,” indicates his belief

that the meaning of individual words can be understood, and therefore books and stories read, with, at the very least, some degree of accuracy (*Studies* 2). Lewis asserts that “knowledge” of the historical and developing meaning of words “is necessary,” beyond general “intelligence and sensibility,” to investigate words and ultimately to arrive at the “intended” meaning of a work (3). However, this further confirms his position that there is significant meaning behind words, only that it must be intelligently arrived at, lest it be misconstrued. In fact, Lewis can address the danger of words losing their precise edge because words themselves are “potent instruments” with the *potential* to “communicat[e]” precise meaning (6). Covington thus concludes that Lewis contributes strongly and importantly to the discourse on language’s functions and limitations: the critic presents the beginning of an implicit argument that in Lewis’s acknowledgement of the limitations of the word (its communication of not all of its “senses and associations,” but of a narrower or intended meaning), he also supports the viable power and ability of language to convey precise and intended meaning (39).

Lewis further addresses an element of larger story that is infused with meaning separately from the intentions of the writer. In several late letters to friends and university colleagues, Lewis indicates his view that, as opposed to allegory, a “good myth” is “a story out of which ever varying meanings will grow for different readers and in different ages” (*Letters* 458). Asserting that, through the medium of myth, it is possible for a writer to put into story “what he does not yet know and c[oul]d not come to know in any other way,” Lewis leaves story, and in this way words, open to the possibility of not only conveying the meaning the author strives for them to represent, but also of being augmented in meaning and significance by “different readers and in

different ages” (458). Regarding *Till We Have Faces*, without diminishing the power or sufficiency of language, Lewis in this way declares that he as “author [didn’t] necessarily understand the meaning of his own story better than anyone else,” and could only “give . . . [his] account of the [story]” (462). Ultimately sharing with Tolkien in the belief that a meta-narrative exists that infuses all other stories with greater meaning than intended even by their authors, Lewis thus hearkens back to the earlier realization that his childhood stories were suffused with an even deeper meaning than he had originally thought. It seems, then, that he was able to connect this literary perspective with the ability of word and story to communicate not only intended meanings, but also underlying truth, and readers can then discover a meaning “at the center of” stories that the author might not purposefully intend (*Letters* 331).

In his essay concerning language in the space trilogy, Gregory Wolfe addresses the way Lewis chose to “not directly write about ‘the ultimate nature of language and the theory of meaning’” in his more straightforward essays and critical works, but instead “grapple[s] with linguistic problems primarily in the concrete, imaginative world of his poetry and fiction,” and particularly in his space trilogy (58). I would posit that this “grappl[ing]” of Lewis’s with language is developed more explicitly in *Perelandra*, the middle novel of his Ransom Trilogy, and, still later, in an even more complex way in *Till We Have Faces*.

Both *Till We Have Faces* and *Perelandra* center around a protagonist making a marked and intentional attempt to communicate via language; in the case of Orual in *Till We Have Faces*, the medium is the written word, her book detailing “all the gods have done to her” and accusing the deities of her mythic and pagan world on that basis. For

Ransom, in *Perelandra*, his endeavor to assert and attain information occurs through spoken conversation, as he finds himself on another planet, in the presence of both a native woman and an earthly man. However, both Orual and Ransom find themselves in circumstances that challenge the efficacy of their words to communicate their intended meaning, and both are ultimately confronted by the presence, the words, and even the silence of the gods. For both Ransom and for Orual, language is central, as it concerns the conveyance and attainment of information that is truthful according to foundational meaning. A consideration of these two novels together thus provides not only a good perspective on the growth in Lewis's views on word, language, and story through his adult and Christian life, but also presents both a fairly comprehensive view of his more concrete positions on language, as well as a venue through which some of his more problematic statements and unanswered questions regarding language are raised and may be considered.



## CHAPTER 1: LEWIS ON WORDS IN *PERELANDRA*

A number of Lewis's ideas about the efficacy of language are worked out through his later retelling of a classical myth in *Till We Have Faces*, but prior fictional groundwork for these ideas is laid in his space trilogy. In Orual's tale, Lewis retells the myth of Cupid and Psyche so that the meta-narrative of the Christian myth is revealed within the already-existing story. In the three novels of his earlier space trilogy, however, his experiment with the concept of earth as one of many worlds created and sustained by Maleldil, the universe's supreme spiritual being, expands the Christian myth to other planets within the existing solar system, rather than revealing it within a smaller story. Lewis develops his space trilogy as a work of the "science-fiction" genre to create a larger mythology as its own meta-narrative for the explanation of events on earth, a "bent" world (*Letters* 492, *Silent* 67). In this way, he is able to work out known spiritual concepts within fictional worlds that, to the reader (and particularly the reader at the time of publication), are by name existent in reality, and yet are experientially unfamiliar.

In his doctrinal work *The Everlasting Man*, G.K. Chesterton, a writer to whom Lewis attributes great literary and spiritual influence, asserts that when "familiarity" begins to "breed contempt," when "fundamentals are doubted" as a result of "tradition, . . . familiarity, . . . and routine," the too-familiar thing must be seen "as new, if only by" being seen "as unnatural" (16). Lewis places the largely-known stories of fall and redemption, blessing and curse that infuse the Christian myth within the fictionalized

planets of Malacandra as Mars in the first novel, and Perelandra as Venus in the second; in this way, he allows the “reader to see” the myth of “Christendom from the outside in,” and thus to view what may have become dull in its familiarity as “new and strange,” as the various elements of the known myth “stand out from their background like supernatural things” (20-21). In *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis “invok[es]” the “wild and soaring . . . imagination” that Chesterton purports as the necessary “longer and more erratic road” that will restore to the reader the wonder he has lost in familiarity with the story (16-18). Thus, instead of revealing the Christian myth within well-known tale, as Lewis will later do in *Till We Have Faces*, the space trilogy places the same core mythology within newly created worlds and myths, producing the effect of seeing the known as a “thing entirely unknown and almost unearthly,” and perhaps, by this road, with more objectivity than before (18, 16).

The three novels of Lewis’s space series, published between 1938 and 1945, follow the man Elwin Ransom through adventures first on Malacandra, then in Perelandra, and finally on his home planet, Earth, as he discovers the true and spiritual state of the universe, of his own planet, of mankind, and of God. Lewis himself is quick to defend his series, and *Perelandra* in particular, not as a simple “allegory” in which the Garden of Eden is represented by a newly-created planet (*Letters* 475). Instead, the novel is a “*supposition*,” in which it is speculated what might happen if “in some other planet there were a first couple undergoing the same [ordeal] that Adam and Even underwent here, but successfully” (475).

On a large scale, this expansion of the Christian myth to incorporate life and events throughout the universe is a straightforward working-out of Lewis and Tolkien’s

belief in an actual and meaningful meta-narrative underlying the historical events of the world. Lewis simultaneously works out his views on the efficacy of language on a smaller scale in the space trilogy, while developing a narrative through which his more individual critique of language in *Till We Have Faces* is significantly connected with these broader ideas of mythology as expressions of truth. While in *Till We Have Faces* he concentrates his working out of the complexities of language's efficacy in one woman's story and attempts to communicate accurately, the space trilogy, and the second novel in particular, present a more clearly delineated development of Lewis's views on word and story. Lewis does this first by investigating the strengths and shortcomings of language largely through the dialogue and attempts at oral retelling of three distinctly different characters, and then by placing these narrative statements on language within a larger structure of myth and history.

For the purposes of examining Lewis's views on language as expressed in the trilogy, a close reading of *Perelandra* provides the most concise picture of an expansion of the Christian myth. It also presents more consistent evidence regarding Lewis's answer to the question of the communicative efficacy of language. As *Out of the Silent Planet* sets the groundwork for the next book, and *That Hideous Strength* contains more social "satire" and "romantic addition[s] of [Lewis's] own" than the straightforward "supposition" of myth and meta-narrative in the middle work, the first and third novel suffice as supplements to support the information in the second novel and to fill out several points that might be examined more fully (*Letters* 379).

The matter of words is addressed early on in the first segment of the novel, with the story's narrator traveling through the "cold and darkness" of an antagonistic

countryside toward the cottage where he is to meet his friend, Ransom (*Perelandra* 14). The traveler recalls the stories Ransom has conveyed to him about his past experience traveling through “Deep Heaven” to Mars, and the narrator’s fears regarding the “long, dreary,” and seemingly “hostile” road drive him to consider again Ransom’s experiences with supernatural beings and to mull over Earth’s state within the “inter-planetary politics” revealed on the philologist’s “journey to Mars” (9-11, 13). It is thus established in the novel’s opening scenes that the “world” of Earth is in an “isolated” state, having been “cut off from communication with other planets” (9, 12).

This isolation is the consequence of Earth’s “bent” state, which has resulted in the committing of the “forbidden thing” by the “first King and first Mother” and the subsequent “bending” of all rational creatures associated with Earth, some to “false” and “evil” purposes, and the ensuing silencing of the planet (*Silent* 121). The eldila, beings both “natural and supernatural,” are thus removed from communication with their counterparts throughout creation, while, moving increasingly away from the event which silenced their planet, the men of Earth retain less and less memory and knowledge of the true state of the universe (11). The characters living on Earth inhabit a planet that is consequently “darkened,” unable to interact with or even know of the occurrences of the larger universe (9, 12). Earth is in this way presented as a fallen world, and its fall is directly connected with the concept of language and communication, or lack thereof. Words are thus presented as key elements in Lewis’s imagined universe, as the consequences of the fall and resulting “bent” state of Earth, or “Thulcandra,” is “isolat[ion]” from the greater creation of which it is a part (*Silent* 67, *Perelandra* 23).

### Concerning the Efficacy of Language on the Individual Level

Lewis's examination of words on an individual level takes place largely within the various dialogues that occur at different points in the novel, providing opportunities for comparison first between Ransom and the Green Woman, and later between Ransom and the Un-man regarding their differing views on the efficacy and significance of language. The first set of these crucial conversations that get at the core of Lewis's views of language occurs between Ransom and the Green Woman, whom he meets shortly after his arrival on Perelandra. Lewis's use of words as epistemological tools is perhaps not the basis for his dealing with language throughout the space trilogy, and is not nearly as central here as it is in *Till We Have Faces*. However, it does play a crucial and straightforward role in the narrative, as the several direct conversations between the Lady and Ransom catalyze an understanding of each in different ways. Regarding the reason for Earth's prevalent incarnation myth, the Green Woman tells Ransom soon after their first meeting that "there is one [reason]" she "know[s]" that "Maleldil," the creative power of the universe, has entered Ransom's world instead of hers in human form (*Perelandra* 63). Ransom, as well, "know[s] . . . another" reason for this occurrence, and in the discussions that ensue between the two, both individuals pursue the truth which is at the center of the cosmic story, just as Orual's working with words through writing is her somewhat successful attempt at getting at the truth of her own story (63).

Although the Green Woman at one point agrees with Weston that she is unable to "make [Ransom] older" until she "is older [herself]," the contribution that both she and the philologist make to the developing understanding of the other suggests otherwise, at

least in the context of Maleldil's instructing the Lady, and eventually even Ransom (115). Particularly in initial conversations with the Lady, Ransom's words make her see things she "never saw . . . before" and enable her to ask the questions which Maleldil then answers, causing her to "grow older" (68). For example, Ransom says what the Lady deems the "best [he has] said yet" by explaining to her, in opposition to the Un-man, one of the reasons Maleldil has instituted the "one law" of not residing on the Fixed Land: that of "joy[ful] . . . obeying" (118). Although he is not from Perelandra, and does not possess full knowledge of the larger universe, Ransom's suggestion to the woman is effective in "mak[ing]" her "older far," as she then understands the concept of "Love" from a different perspective than before (118).

These new recognitions of the order of the woman's world in turn begin to enlighten Ransom about the nature of creation, humanity, and God. Though his comprehension develops slowly and with more difficulty than that of the woman, as she repeats her revelations, he begins to comprehend the bigger picture of the "different worlds" of the universe and ultimately the broader mythological significance of Maleldil's "Incarnation" on Earth (61). The Earthly man and Perelandrian woman are thus enabled to ask questions and learn because language proves a fit tool with which to, according to Chesterton's model, step "Alongside" the "familiar" and "look at oneself" as if it were "[something] new" (*Perelandra* 60, Chesterton 16).

However, though words are perhaps sufficient tools with which to accumulate and expand knowledge, the words exchanged between Ransom and the Lady in the form of questions, speculations, and answers are still imperfect vehicles for this exchange of understanding about the reality of their worlds, at least in the case of Ransom's

communication and learning. While the Green Woman's initial great discovery—her realization that she is not “carried in the will of” Maleldil, but “walk[s] with” it—comes about through words with Ransom, the philologist is the one who applies words incorrectly (62). His first difficulty with language concerns his inability to conceptualize his world as the place in which Maleldil “became a man” without also establishing Earth as a significant historical “corner,” which he believes should be large in size according to its significant status (62). The Lady's consequent confusion is due to Ransom's misuse of the word, as “Corner” in her world “is not the name of a size,” and language thus becomes a less-than-perfect medium for communication, as words are understood differently by different people (62).

Ransom expresses further frustration as he is “goaded into argument” by his inability to comprehend the woman's welcoming attitude toward seemingly “unwelcome” events, such as the circumstance of meeting him instead of the King, whom she was “expecting and hoping” to see (68). Though she is quick to understand Ransom's thoughts and his purposes in speaking, the Lady is unable here to clearly communicate her perspective to him, or, more to the point, he is incapable of fully comprehending it. Although the Green Woman also experiences misunderstanding of Ransom's communication with her, asking him such things as what the word “rubbish” signifies, the basis for their misunderstandings differs. Unlike Orual in *Till We Have Faces*, the Green Woman receives the knowledge that she communicates to Ransom directly from “Maleldil[s] . . . telling” her, while Ransom is not entirely correct or accurate in his expression and understanding of what he observes in the world around

him, as he, an inhabitant of the “silent planet,” has been removed from such open communication of the reality of his universe (*Perelandra* 61).

The resulting implications for the efficacy of language in *Perelandra* are thus complex, as the Green Woman’s periodic confusion regarding words is the result not of a deficiency in the effectiveness of language per se, but of her “young[ness]” in the world (60). She misunderstands not because words are incapable of communicating meaning, but because she has not yet learned the meaning behind the words. As Flieger points out, language fails in such circumstances, not because it is an insufficient medium, but because the experience, and thus the experiential knowledge, upon which it rests is different, not in opinion, but in “disjunction of outlook” (57). This is evidenced by the comparative simplicity in the process of her assimilation of that meaning. As Ransom asks questions regarding her desire for circumstances “to be otherwise” than they are, the woman perceives what he is implying in his queries and so understands new concepts that quickly become “as plain as the sky” to her, though she has “never [seen] them before” (*Perelandra* 68). Ransom, on the other hand, “[doesn’t] see the wonder and the glory of” the concepts the Lady has “[come] to understand” according to what he has unwittingly “made [her] see” (69); her expression of increasing confidence in the glory of “turn[ing] from the good expected to the given good” frustrate Ransom, to whom these concepts, once explained, do not so easily become “as plain as the sky” (69, 68).

This distinction between pre-lapsarian and post-lapsarian use of language is later illustrated more clearly, as the King of Perelandra, whom Ransom finally meets in the ending chapters of the novel, echoes the Christian creation myth on the “morning day” of his planet’s existence (196). The King declares the name of a certain Perelandrian sea as



“Lur,” and consequently “utter[s] not an observation but an enactment” (210). This use of language not merely to name but also to define illustrates the greatest potential of language for created beings within Lewis’s world. Though, as in the Christian story, the King is neither creator nor sustainer of his world, he is yet incorrupt regarding evil in the universe, and thus has greater knowledge of the true meta-narrative and greater ability to use language to powerful effect.

Although in Lewis’s created universe language has this potential for efficacious power in the extreme, and though inhabitants even of Earth are not confined to use language as a purely futile endeavor, the use of words by inhabitants of the darkened and silent planet is limited because it is corrupted, or “bent.” This seemingly contradictory presentation of the power and limits of language has roots in the connection between language and the fallenness of Ransom’s Earth, as well as between the open communication and “non-silenced” state of other planets in Lewis’s fictionalized universe. In many ways existing in a fallen state similar to that of Ransom, Orual in *Till We Have Faces* cannot enjoy unhindered communication with the gods because of her lack of understanding, rather than any deficiency in language itself. In a very similar way, as a fallen human from Earth, Ransom is isolated in his understanding of the Green Woman’s words because of his life-long isolation from understanding the realities of the universe. And though the Green Woman does gain some “new knowledge... from” Ransom, who himself at times demonstrates understanding of the universe’s master narrative, like Orual’s separation from understanding of the gods and thus of her world and herself, his previous isolation from revelation of the truths of the universe prevents him from using language to communicate his full intention (69).

In contrast, the pre-lapsarian Lady of Perelandra has direct communication with and receives knowledge from Maleldil and thus comprehends and uses words to precise effect, once she has obtained understanding of the concepts and meaning behind the words. Unlike Ransom, her difficulty with language use and understanding only manifests itself because she has not yet learned the meaning behind the words, not because she is in any way hindered from doing so; as illustrated in the King's naming of places on Perelandra, she may not even know these things because their being or definition has not yet been verbally "uttered" (210).

Lewis's treatment of language through Ransom's experience ultimately differs from his working-out of language in the Lady's experience, as Ransom must eventually be confronted by the presence of Maleldil. In this way, Ransom's experience with words continues to look forward to Orual's, not only by virtue of the fact that both are removed from the ability to understand and use language accurately, but also because they must receive knowledge from the god or gods of their worlds in order to use language to represent this knowledge.

From the beginning of his time on Perelandra, and specifically after "the very first moments of his conversation with the Lady," Ransom has a strong "sense of being in Someone's Presence which . . . descend[s] on him with . . . unbearable pressure," and "[does] not disappear," but increases after "he [has] left her" presence (72). This impression of "complete fulness," of non-"vacuum," is later confirmed to Ransom as that of Maleldil, a "formidable" "Presence" presumably akin to Ransom's understanding of the Christian Holy Ghost, which demonstrates characteristics beyond a simple "blind, inarticulate purposiveness" (72, 91, 144). This purposeful and communicative Presence

goes further than simply making itself known, actually confronting Ransom with the truth of his own thoughts. Additionally, this Presence communicates what the philologist should do concerning the evil being—the Un-man—who has arrived on the planet. At the point of Ransom’s indecision concerning whether to verbally rebut or to physically attack the Un-man, it is not his own words, but the communication of this “Presence” in the “darkness” that wins out (144). In his attempts to argue the theological “absurdity of a physical battle with the Un-man” as the answer for removing the dangers of evil from the Mother of Perelandra, the “argumentative stride” of Ransom’s “voluble self . . . gradually . . . lapse[s] into silence” (144). It is instead the soundless voice that communicates clearly with Ransom, telling him that he is “wasting [his] time” with such arguments (144). Maleldil thus proceeds to provide clarity of understanding and revelation of Perelandra’s true state and dilemma, as well as understanding of Ransom’s own dilemma and purpose.

Just as Orual is simultaneously silenced and answered after she has not only read her own argument against the gods, but has read it “over and over,” the Presence confronting Ransom with what he knows to be true “puts the truths” of the universe, and thus of what he must do, “into his hands like terrible jewels” (*Faces* 292, *Perelandra* 144). Ransom is then able to realize the “mythological” significance and necessity of Perelandra’s existence without adhering to distinctions between truth, myth, and fact, “which resulted from the Fall” on Earth (*Perelandra* 144). It is the silence that ultimately reveals the answer to Orual’s complaint, and the same “terrible,” truth-laden “silence,” which “Almost” speaks to Ransom, tells him clearly “that it knows” the lies and

contradictions he is using in argument against attacking the “immortal enemy” (144, 146).

Interestingly, the “Voice”-like silence becomes “more and more like a face” that confronts Ransom with what he knows to be true, while he has been selfishly and futilely arguing (146, 144). This near-voice and almost-face not only confront Ransom with what he already knows—that he is “telling lies”—but, acting as a “creat[ive]” power, it also “contend[s]” with Ransom’s arguments and “efforts to resist the conviction of what he must do” (144, 146). Ransom then recognizes new possibilities, which ultimately enable him to perceive a larger, more significant and meaningful pattern of events (147). Although Ransom’s argument with the audible silence chiefly concerns his immediate circumstances, it also looks forward to the revelation of the gods to Orual, as, in order to be accurately stated, the speech she has been attempting to say for years, must be “dug out of” her by gods who know the defensive deceptiveness of her own carefully-crafted argument (*Faces* 294). Language thus functions as an avenue toward both knowledge and experience, as Ransom’s interaction here with the god of his universe highlights the “shifting tensions of man’s relationship with God” through the “language of experience and the experience of language” (Flieger 42).

The second means by which Lewis discusses linguistic adequacy in *Perelandra* is the Un-man’s narrative use of language, particularly expressed in his dealings with the Green Woman. The Un-man, a “monstrosity” that at once “was and was not Weston,” is understood by Ransom to be a “whole-hearted” expression of the “evil” inhabiting Weston’s corpse-like body (111, 107). In a Garden-of-Eden scenario, Lewis again addresses the matter of language, as the Un-man begins telling the Lady of Perelandra

“stories... about women” in Earth’s history (*Perelandra* 126). Ransom quickly recognizes that through these stories Weston is intentionally projecting an “image” of the Earthly woman who has “braved a terrible risk for her child, her lover, or her people,” and who has been “misunderstood” and “persecuted” for these choices that are, somehow, in the best interest of her loved ones, and ultimately, of humanity (126, 125). The Un-man’s tactics with the lady recall similarities to the tempting and deceiving serpent in the Christian myth, which Lewis recreates in *Perelandra* as an alternate picture of the elements of “Christendom” viewed “from the outside in” (Chesterton 20). The Un-man uses word and story to entice by deceptive suggestion; though he presents the women in his tales as being “of a great spirit,” this enemy who poses such a threat to *Perelandra*’s pre-lapsarian state actually creates stories in which the woman’s “disobedience” is construed as “Duty,” a woman who actually seeks her own “grandeur” under the guise of performing a “Great Deed” for the King and her future children (106, 131).

The Un-man’s deliberate use of story at this point is both deceptive and effective, as Ransom speculates that the individuals in these tales are perhaps not noble and sacrificial women doing what “needed to have [been] done,” but are instead “witches or perverts” (126). The Un-man’s use of language to infuse the idea of the “rebellious virtue of . . . females” and alternately the “childish, . . . arrogant,” and “unoriginating” nature of men is “very well done,” as Ransom himself “all but believ[es]” his enemy’s insinuations (126). Though they do not induce her to sin, the effect of these words on the Green Woman enables her to “respond in a purely imaginative fashion” to the “new art of story or Poetry” (127). Glover asserts that “Stories are meant to reveal the truth, to

uncover that which lies hidden, but they can be mistold or twisted in both language and plot so that they in fact distort or change the truth and lead the reader to quite wrong conclusions” (172). Though in a way weakening language, the woman’s unfamiliarity with the subjects of Weston’s stories—her lack of experience and knowledge—here also lend strength to Weston’s arguments and stories, as her “disjunction of outlook” keeps her from recognizing the meaning behind them. Thus, she is able to be deceived (Flieger 57). Conversely and appropriately, it seems that the weakness of language as means of communication is a source of strength in matters of conveying “anti-meaning.”

Weston, or the Un-man, crafts this use of language and story in a manner that enables the Lady to develop a mental image of her own “great soul” (139). After introducing clothes made of feathers to the Green Woman, Weston provides her first means of viewing her physical self in a mirror. As a result of this new and frightening vision of the Lady’s “beautiful body,” the Un-man is able to inspire in her mind dangerous images of herself that Lewis articulates in literary terms (138). The woman’s “thoughts” become “occupied” with a sort of near-“vanity” that goes beyond the “affair of the robes and the mirror” to conceive self as centrally important (138). This “perilous” temptation offered to the Green Woman to view herself as the “transcenden[tly] importan[t] . . . central image” in her own life and world is thus not only delivered by means of story, but is perpetuated in terms of language and story, as the Un-man seeks to make the woman’s “mind a theatre in which” her newly developing “dramatic conception of self . . . should take the stage” (139). In this way, language is presented not only as a tool for communicating an epistemology of what is true and real in the existing world, but also for the—here more dangerous—“stepping out of life into the Alongside” and

viewing oneself within a construct that is “not only . . . what is but . . . what might be” (60, 104).

In other words, words and story are here used to create an alternate construct of reality that goes against the universal meta-narrative to which Lewis subscribes, a narrative that defines inalterably what is true and good. Though in some ways limited, words are therefore presented in the novel as being effective tools for epistemological purposes of communicating and understanding what is true, as well as for the more corrupt purpose of conveying new images and ideas of the self and the world that are contrary to the greater, foundational myth that lends meaning to creation. As Glover explains, “in *Perelandra* . . . we are confronted with . . . the dangerous power which stories have to expand knowledge and thus if wrongly used to distort truth and destroy meaning and life” (171). In a sense, words are functional, more or less successfully, both as arbiters of meaning and of anti-meaning.

The particular significance of these opposed purposes of language in the novel, as represented by Ransom and Weston’s opposing worldviews, is ultimately communicated in the concluding chapters of the novel by “conversation” between the gods of Venus and Mars and the parents of *Perelandra* (214). Ransom fears that “all is without plan or meaning” as the Un-man has purported, and he seeks the powers of Mars and Venus to discover the center, or “central happening” in the universe (213). The final scenes of the novel confirm his hopes, as the “archon[s]” Malacandra and *Perelandra* themselves explain that “all” of existence is certainly “driving” toward something, and that if Ransom and other men of earth “doubt if any shape or plan or pattern” exists, it is only because the “Great Dance” of events in the universe is in actuality “all plan” and “all

centre” (195, 214, 213, 218). The implications of this upon words is two-fold, as, firstly, it indicates that words do signify meaningful and unchangeable truths, and secondly, it offers the hopeful suggestion that language is capable of at least somewhat effectively communicating these truths.

However, though this confirmation of central meaning and true myth in the universe is communicated to Ransom through spoken language, Lewis again looks forward to a combined verbal and visual communication used by the gods in *Till We Have Faces*. In this way, he addresses his further position that language has limitations of its own that are not connected with a lack of individual knowledge or of the fallen moral state, but with actual deficiencies in the medium. The means by which Malacandra and Perelandra, together with the King and Queen of the planet, explain all of this to Ransom finally “transition[s] . . . into sight” (218). By this augmented means of representation, Ransom is in some way able to actually see the Great Dance, and understands that “Each figure as he look[s] at it [becomes] the master-figure” of the movement, and then “itself” becomes “entangled” again in the vision so that other figures are seen as central, “good” and “significan[t]” (218). The “gods” of the universe in Lewis’s space trilogy thus rely on visual representation as well as language, when words will not suffice to convey a complete enough vision. Just as the gods of Orual’s world integrate words with visual art, Ransom’s final discovery regarding existent meaning in the universe is best received by language and visual image, supporting again Lewis’s recognition that language, though often effective (and “worth” the effort), is not *always* the best—or even a sufficient—medium by which to communicate meaning (*Letters* 456).



This illustration of the limitations of language is actually acknowledged, though not so clearly worked out, earlier in the novel, as Ransom communicates to his visiting friend that “words . . . are vague” (33). The context for this comment is his attempt to describe the “trans-sensuous” experience of bodily “functions and appetites” on Perelandra, a “thing” which Ransom is unable to “express,” not because “it’s . . . too vague . . . to put into words,” but, on the contrary, because “it’s too *definite* for language” (32, 33). Language is further presented as an inherently limited means of representation as the friend and narrator’s account of Ransom’s sensations and cognitions upon arrival in Perelandra span four pages, whereas the period of time described “had lasted less than five minutes” (37). The narrator’s acknowledgement here that “words are slow” reiterates Lewis’s comments in several of his letters that language is not always the most ideal and effective medium for “describ[ing] the thing” (*Letters* 456).

In his *Studies in Words*, he directly addresses the matter of language’s imprecision in describing, for example, a “very complicated change which happens suddenly”: “If we do justice to the complexity, the time the reader must take over the passage will destroy the feeling of suddenness. If we get in the suddenness we shall not be able to get in the complexity” (*Studies* 314). In the same way, the narrator’s attempts to describe in detail the initial five minutes of Ransom’s experience in Perelandra, recognizing that the slow words of his explanation last longer than the small span of time in which Ransom developed understanding of his circumstances, illustrate these points well; as Ransom’s sensations of “rapidly increasing weight,” “first impression[s]” of adjusting light and varying color, and recognition that the “slant[ing] . . . horizontal line[s]” he sees are “wave[s]” amidst a vast ocean are “all . . . [seen] in a flash,” Lewis

conveys his position on language as a necessary, yet necessarily flawed, “instrument” for the communication of certain things (33-35).

In his development of the individual strengths and shortcomings of words and communication in *Perelandra*, Lewis presents a multifaceted and yet straightforward working-out of his otherwise stated positions on language. As we will see, Orual’s experience with representing and defending by means of language is complex, the various precision and vagueness of words being wrapped up in her individual story and developed and evolved through her interactions with the gods; though admittedly due partially to more simplistic plot and characters, Ransom’s experiences with language in *Perelandra* present an even clearer depiction of Lewis’s concern with the human “defective[ness]” of the “instrument” of language, and yet also offer a more hopeful suggestion, echoing his confidence in *Studies in Words* that men may find their “own ways of palliating [the] defect in the instrument” (313, 314).

In this way, the earthly man’s use of language in the novel contradicts Wolfe’s criticism that Lewis does not successfully remove himself from Platonist theories of language as “totally fallen and corrupted” in such a way that it has lost any “intrinsic relationship with the transcendent” (74, 75). In the character of the Mother of *Perelandra*, before any influence of moral and spiritual corruption, Lewis also goes beyond acknowledging the inherent limitations of the medium of words to present a clearer picture of his hope in the potential for language to get, in this case, *more* than a “fraction of [the intended meaning] into words” (*Letters* 361). However, Lewis does contrast the corrupted human use of words with the precision of “divine” language, due to the gods’ more complete understanding of the whole; he thus delineates more specifically the

elements involved in the question of language's capability to communicate intended meaning, as the Earthly man's language—or use thereof—has been corrupted by his bentness, while the King and Mother's language is more precise and powerfully effective, and yet the words of the gods are the ultimate realization and fusion of knowledge and words to the most efficacious end. Ultimately, Lewis presents language as a sufficiently effective epistemological vehicle, operating in *Perelandra*, at least somewhat successfully, as a means of representing both “what is” in an effort to convey the truths of existent reality and “what might be,” as illustrated in Weston's converse efforts to deconstruct the master story established by Maleldil.

#### Implications of the Efficacy of Language in Lewis's Concept of Myth as Fact

The twofold significance of Lewis's working-out of language in *Perelandra* moves easily from making implications on the individual level to asserting them on a broader and more universal plane. The very words between the Green Lady, Ransom, and Weston in their initial conversations proceed beyond providing a means of presenting and learning truths or manipulative deceptions about themselves, indicating on a larger scale the existent truth and foundational meaning in the world of *Perelandra*.

The existence of this larger, defined reality, that “central happening” for which Ransom hopes, is indicated first through language in the results of his impulse at one point to “utter” a “small lie” (70). When the Lady asks the reason behind Ransom's frustrated posture—his furrowed brow and tense shoulders—he responds untruthfully that “they mean nothing,” rather than explaining that they indicate his emotion of disgust

(70). This intentionally untrue assertion is consequently “[flung] back at him” as the “silver meadow and the golden sky” themselves respond against this misuse of language (70). In fact, the falsehood Ransom tells to the Lady which causes a tangible “anger in the very air” itself deals with the significance of a thing, as, when questioned whether his gestures of “sulkiness” are the “signs of something in [his] world,” Ransom seeks to explain that they “mean nothing”—a statement that is both untrue and offensive to the meaningfulness of the universe’s structure (70). As a result, his body, also, is “tor[n]” as if he would “vomit” (70). Key elements in one of the initial scenarios in which Lewis indicates a living meaning behind words and language, Ransom’s denial of the truth and significance of the world, and Perelandra’s “ang[ry]” rejection of that denial, establish a key connection between language’s efficacy on the individual level and its greater ramifications on existent meaning in the universe.

This relationship between words and universal meaning is further carried out, again, by the contrast between Weston and Ransom’s views on language as expressed in the discussions and arguments that occur between the Un-man, Ransom, and the Green Woman. Weston expresses his view of life and humanity early on as being without significant meaning, as he declares to Ransom, upon arrival on Perelandra, that “Man himself is nothing” (91). In this initial conversation with Ransom on the Fixed Land, Weston does acknowledge that there is “Meaning,” and even “true and living” meaning, “beneath” the “crust” of the “theological technicalities” on Earth, and that the religious view of life”—here referring to Ransom’s Christianity—contains some “essential truth” (91). However, Weston’s persuasive words to the Green Woman soon after this initial interaction dispel any suggestion that he is in agreement with Ransom that the meaning

beneath the crust of life is a “solider reality than we dream” (201). Indeed, his subsequent manipulation of the Lady by means of deceptive story-telling suggests the view opposing that of Ransom (and of Lewis), that words, and what the Mother of Perelandra deems “Poetry,” do not indicate what “really is,” but “what might be” (105, 104). As Weston seeks to convince the Green Woman that, by “think[ing] about dwelling on the Fixed Land,” and in that sense creating a story about “what might be,” he seeks to use language in a way that develops story and potential meaning outside of the construct of the true myth that is the meaningful foundation of Perelandra and the rest of the universe (104).

This propagation of the Un-man’s position on language directly opposes Lewis’s own perspective on story, in which the “beautiful words” of stories “put together . . . And then [told] . . . to one another” are actually vehicles moving toward the development and realization of what is already reality and truth (104). The Green Woman catches on to Weston’s manipulation of her understanding and of the true meaning that lies beneath the crust of her world when she juxtaposes “Poetry,” what the Un-man calls words “put . . . together to mean things that have never happened,” against what “really is” (105, 104). The assertions Weston makes through stories are thus directly opposed to Lewis’s stated position on words as worthwhile vehicles for story, and story as an effective vehicle of the “Perfect myth,” demonstrating larger mythological truths that lend meaning to and are lent meaning by creation (“Myth” 67).

Again functioning in a manner similar to the deceiving serpent of the Christian myth, Weston’s representation of story also reflects the purposes of the fallen being Melkor at the beginning of the “Ainulindalë,” the creation account in Tolkien’s own mythology. Both the Un-man and Melkor uphold the making of new things outside of

the established order of creation, instead of retelling already-existent or planned truths. In a second interaction with Perelandra's Eve, with the cunning of a tempter, Weston continues to articulate the perspective that in "making . . . story or poetry about things that might be but are not," an individual is reaching beyond what has been true in the world to grasp at "new fruit that is offered" in alternate ideas and possibilities (112). In other words, according to the Un-man, truth is not something that exists at the core of a central story or a meta-narrative, but instead is progressively evolved by mankind, as humanity continually "reach[es] forward," so that "greatness always transcends mere moralism," as the "diabolism" of one period of time "becomes the morality of the next stage" (95).

The Un-man attempts to set this evolution into action on Perelandra by reinterpreting the Green Woman's understanding of the laws Maleldil has set on her planet, namely, that of not "living on the Fixed Island," (112). He thus uses story in a manipulative and deceptive attempt to make the Lady believe that Maleldil would desire to "[change] His command" against abiding on the Fixed Land, or even will that the Green Woman break that command for the attainment of some "new" and better "good" (116, 132). This new possibility is difficult for the Green Woman to accept, not because of the Un-man's "making" of story, but because "this one story" alters what she has previously understood about Maleldil, who she knows would not "change His command" or desire her to act "against His command" (112).

The changeableness and progression necessarily implied by this assertion regarding Maleldil's character and the statutes of Perelandra conflict with the way she, and Ransom as well, have known the world to be; her response to this suggestion is to

imagine a world in which she “cannot drink” the “water” and “cannot breathe” the “air,” indicating that there are established elements in her world, and the thought of their being altered is as unrealistic as the “sky” turning “all black” (112). The Un-man’s new suggestion of the state of Perelandra and Maleldil’s intentions thus create a “story” that does not reflect what is true of the universe, and which on the one hand can function as a manipulative tool against established truth, but which also will never coincide with real possibilities in the world of Perelandra (112). The elements in the Green Woman’s world are definite and unchanging, with truth at the core, just as stories for Lewis are not evolving progressions toward developing truth, but are all branches of a larger, enduring meta-narrative.

The Un-man’s ultimate goal in his weaving of stories of “what might be” is for the Woman to become increasingly autonomous from reliance on both Maleldil and the King for wisdom, in direct opposition to her receiving the “good given” her by Maleldil, who she has previously known to be good (69). Instead of encouraging her to move toward the greater meaning that infuses her world, he tells her that to become “really old,” or wise, she must become “really separate from” the creator who gives her wisdom and understanding (117). The vision the Un-man presents is that of a man or woman “stand[ing] up in its own reason . . . even against Maleldil,” and in that way, as he earlier explained to Ransom, always “leap[ing] forward” and “transcend[ing]” what has been established as good and true (117, 95). According to the Un-man, the meaning that can be seen in the world is but a crust one can either sink under into emptiness and misery, or “reach forward” and above to the “Other,” to new meanings and new truths (95, 117).

The Un-man frames this information within the context of story, at one point encouraging the woman to “reach forward” to create her own story, and at another telling tales of Earthly women who have done this very thing. However, this pursuit of the Other is, in essence, a rupture of the great myth, or story, that suffuses creation with truth, and is an encouragement to the Green Woman to break away from the already-established meta-narrative that infuses her world with meaning. Both Ransom and Lewis hold that language and the events of the universe are concentric, purposefully united, and always lending wisdom and meaning to each other because of the foundational true myth that is at the center; the Un-man purports that truth evolves in a linear direction, continually “reach[ing] forward,” and thus away from the place where it began (95). The irony, of course, is that, though the Un-man’s desires here resonate of Melkor’s “desire . . . to bring into Being things of his own” that are “not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar,” the created worlds of both Lewis and of Tolkien ultimately engulf this opposing view and purpose within the working-out of their foundational myths (*Silmarillion* 16).

This all-encompassing, foundational meta-narrative in Lewis’s universe, in which even a “creature” like the Un-man, being “by all human standards, inside out,” is purposefully drawn into the core meaning of his world, reflects the connection Lewis makes between story and the reality of the world (*Perelandra* 123). Just as the serpent within the Christian myth is ultimately subject to the larger purposes of the story it seeks to thwart, Weston’s case for the mutability of truth and reality is full of irony—he is playing a role in a tale that has already been told, not only in the Christian story to which Lewis subscribed, but in works such as Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*, in which Ilúvatar, the



divine creator, integrates even the most disparate and contradictory strains of music into the “solemn pattern” of his own great Creation Theme (*Silmarillion* 17). Ransom, in fact, tells the Lady in a later interaction that “Whatever” she “do[es], [Maleldil] will make good of it”—admittedly, if the Woman seeks to follow the Un-man’s progressive path, this may not be the “good He had prepared for you if you had obeyed Him,” but Lewis indicates here that there is established story in the world of Perelandra that will prevail (*Perelandra* 121). In this way, the Un-man’s “wisdom” in attempting to create new and unthought of stories in Perelandra apparently does not comprehend the larger framework in which he already exists as an integral part of established and true myth (104).

Ransom ultimately addresses the deception of the Un-man’s stories, pointing out to the Lady that through these tales of tragic and falsely sacrificial women, the enemy is “making” her “say words that mean nothing” (132). The implication is that this linear philosophy of life to which the Un-man subscribes gets away from truth, again on the linear plane, and that Ransom’s perspective on language, as a reflection of Lewis’s, is concerned with words that do “mean” something that returns to some existing central significance (132). Ransom points out to the Woman that there is no “good” in “saying [she] would [disobey Maleldil] for the King’s sake when [she] know[s] it is what the King would hate most,” and words thus do not express an evolving meaning—a self-contradictory concept (132). Instead, words affirm “what is” and thus reaffirm established truth as expressed in the larger, factual myth that defines reality (104).

According to Lewis, language is not intended as a means of increasing autonomy in created beings or of the ultimate attainment of individual deity; words and story instead are intended to communicate what is true about creation, and even to reaffirm

already-determined identity. For example, Ransom realizes at the end of his stay on Perelandra that, though the “Tempter” might suggest that the “elaborate division of the human race into two sexes” is “meant for no other purpose than offspring,” the mythology the philologist knows, based on “fundamental” meaning, has taught him that “Gender is” instead a “[fundamental] reality” infused with meaning and purpose (131, 200). The greater significance of the Un-man’s proposition of evolving story is in this way illustrated in its juxtaposition against the idea of an all-encompassing and meaningful myth that infuses the world (or in this case, worlds) with unchanging truth. The Un-man’s language and story-telling may “arouse” “indistinctly splendid images,” but, though perhaps not so dramatically appealing to the Green Woman, the rebuttals of Ransom are definite and real, and founded on central and pre-existing fact (134).

## CHAPTER 2: LEWIS ON WORDS IN *TILL WE HAVE FACES*

Having begun to develop his position on language through the September 1931 conversation between himself, Tolkien, and Dyson, Lewis continued throughout his adult life to work out his ideas of both the significance of story and the ability of language to communicate meaning. In this way, he proceeded beyond his science fiction work in the space trilogy to develop his ideas of both the underlying meaning of words and the underlying meta-narrative of history's stories and myths in his later retelling of the classic Cupid and Psyche myth. As previously stated, rather than creating his own mythology as a venue for communicating a certain worldview, Lewis in this instance retells an already-existing myth in such a way as to reveal the underlying master story. In this way, though in a very different sort of novel, Lewis is able to continue his working out of the intricacies and interdependency of the specific meaningfulness of individual words within the larger significance of myth and story. The struggle Lewis indicates in his letters and in *Studies in Words* concerning the drive to construct meaning with word and story—and the admitted difficulty of the task—is further addressed and explained, in some ways successfully and in other ways not, in the novel *Till We Have Faces*.

Despite his reference to this novel as his “one big failure both with the critics and with the public,” the work was also considered by Lewis to be “far and away the best book [he had] written” (*Letters* 492). In *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis presents a retelling of the original Cupid and Psyche myth, the earliest version of which is found in the midst

of a larger mythological tale recorded by Apuleius in the early second century, and subsequently entitled both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Golden Ass*. This tale, occurring first in Latin but presumably based upon an earlier Greek myth, tells the story of Psyche, whose great beauty inspires the jealousy of her two sisters and the goddess Venus. Envious of Psyche's rescue by Cupid from his vengeful mother and of her subsequent marriage to him, the sisters contrive to ruin Psyche's happiness through trickery veiled as love and genuine concern. In so doing, they effect her banishment from Cupid's palace, bringing about their own deaths at the hand of Cupid and subjecting Psyche to a lifetime of wandering and final enslavement to Venus, who requires the woman to perform impossible tasks. In the original tale, Psyche completes these tasks with the assistance of various gods and other beings and is ultimately reconciled to both Cupid and Venus (Walsh 11-23).

With his literary theories of word and story as inherently meaningful in view, Lewis's version of the myth makes several key changes to the story, introducing the character of Orual as Psyche's oldest sister and princess and then queen of Glome, from whose perspective the story is told. On the one hand, Orual, who is physically "ugly," is unlike her sister Psyche; however, she is also unlike the sisters in the original myth, in that her demonstration of love for her sister, while perhaps not entirely "true," is also not so blatantly self-motivated (*Faces* 10, 312). This difference between Orual and both Lewis's Psyche and the jealous sisters in Apuleius's tale is both the source of her struggle to view herself as a truly loving person, and the impetus for her to write her argument against the gods. This struggle—at its core, a struggle with the efficacy of words, language, and the use of language to convey truth in story form—defines the structure of

the novel. Like the sisters of the original myth, Orual does persuade Psyche to “disobey” the god of the mountain and “put” his identity “to the test” by “look[ing]” upon him with a lamp while he “sleeps,” concealing this manipulation of Psyche beneath what even Orual believes to be a concern for her sister’s safety and mental well-being against the “evil or shameful thing” that “ha[s] taken” her (163, 162). These actions, however, are actually motivated not by a jealous desire to harm Psyche, but by a more ambiguously driven “craving” desire not to lose the sister Orual so loves (151).

Further, Orual differs from the jealous sisters of the original myth in her ultimate realization that this great love she claims to have for Psyche is actually a “sickening,” “craving” type of love, that makes her “ugly in soul,” like the bloodthirsty goddess Ungit (267, 281). The result of Orual’s chief struggle in the tale, which she recounts as her defense against the “exile and wandering” that the gods have imposed upon both her and her beautiful sister, is the discovery of her actual motives and her true self. She is increasingly confronted with the jealousy woven through her actions toward her sister, actions which she believes to initially have been only “grave and provident,” selfless and loving (176, 152). As she works out and finally acknowledges the truth of her own guilt, through both her actual experience and the writing of her own narrative, she is reunited with Psyche and, again unlike the characters in Apuleius’s myth, both are absolved and made “beautiful . . . beyond all imagining” (307). Orual is then finally able to “love [Psyche] as [she] would once have thought it impossible to love” (307-8).

Lewis uses Orual’s writing of these experiences with the gods and with Psyche to address the question of the efficacy of language more specifically than in *Perelandra*, and develops, as well, his concept of foundational meta-narrative in a creatively different way

than he does in the space trilogy. He works out both of these aspects of language and story through Orual's endeavors in story-telling, as she recounts her experiences and interactions with her beloved sister and with the gods, who she deems cruel, merciless, and unfair.

Lewis's confidence that the pagan myths he loved as a boy contained inherent truths reflective of a larger truth, the "Perfect Myth and Perfect Fact" of Christianity's "Dying God," is thus worked out in several directions in *Till We Have Faces*—not in a directly allegorical form, which he argues against in earlier letters—but through various elements and circumstances within the story (*Faces* 308; "Myth" 66). Although the characters in the novel are placed in the worlds of Glome's pagan culture and of the Greek philosophy and religion espoused by the Fox, Lewis's mythopoeic theory of story and legend infuses the tale with deeper meaning. In the place of the Christian myth's demand for pristine human sacrifice, the goddess Ungit requires the "Great Offering" of Psyche's death as the "Accursed" for the purging of "impur[ity]" in her land and for the blessing of her people (*Faces* 46, 45); as the merciful and rescuing deity, the god of the mountain rescues Psyche from exposure to the elements and certain death by unchaining her from the tree; in an allusion to the fallen human condition as in the Christian myth, Orual is darkened in her understanding of herself, her surrounding world, and the motives and deeds of the gods, until divine revelation opens her eyes. In these ways and in others, Lewis works with the original myth's elements to reveal in the tale of Cupid and Psyche the "central myth of the Christian story": the story of an incarnate and dying god, which he further describes as "carry[ing] with it into the world of Fact all the properties of a myth" ("Myth" 67). The connection in *Till We Have Faces* between language and myth

is thus more explicitly developed than in much of Lewis's other adult fiction. Orual simultaneously finds herself within a world of myth that is true, and is thus able to more clearly and accurately express what has truly occurred in her life.

The novel in this way works through the already-existing myth to reveal within what Lewis believes to be the universal meta-narrative of human fallenness and redemption, with divine intervention leading to true self-knowledge. On a more individual scale, he uses the words of Orual's complaint against the gods to develop his literary theories within a narrative that hinges on the art of storytelling, of retelling, of words themselves, and even of a truth that in some ways supersedes the efficacy of words. As Mara E. Donaldson puts it, this novel is "explicitly a story about the nature and importance of story," which "is significant because it clarifies and extends Lewis's literary critical works on narrative" (157, 169). As Orual initially "dare[s] to write" an "accus[ation]" of the gods in the hope that one day her written words will be "talk[ed] of" and that "wise men will know whether [her] complaint is right," she continues in the end, after much revelation from the gods, to "unroll [her] book" and "add to it," having finally comprehended that she, and not the god of the mountain, is the one who is blameworthy and unloving (3, 253). In his novel, Lewis thus develops a character whose struggle with words, whose attempts to record her initial perception of the god of the mountain and his actions, coincide with her growth in understanding, as she finally recognizes who the god is, and therefore who she is and what her true motives have been.

Although Donaldson legitimately divides the novel into three sections and in that way addresses the separate narratives they contain—those of Orual, Psyche, and the priest of Issur—the chief interest here may be found in Orual's tale and her individual

experience, as it is the account that drives the novel and is ultimately the most complex and “telling” of Lewis’s theories on language (159). Lewis uses Orual’s changing account of her story—which comprises the two parts of the novel—to develop his position on the effectiveness and shortcomings of words, working this out, as in *Perelandra*, through the concept of the epistemological value of language. Orual’s assertions and discoveries comprise the information between the beginning and end of her narrative endeavor; in this way they raise, address, and in some ways answer the question of whether or not her words are able to communicate what the facts of her experience are, and what elements are at work in the efficacy of her writing.

In *Till We Have Faces*, the tension between the human drive of crafting words to convey reality accurately and the final suggestion that perhaps words in certain circumstances are not all-sufficient to convey ultimate reality thus reflects, and reflects upon, Lewis’s previous writings concerning the efficacy of language. It can be seen that at different points in the novel he corroborates and diverges from what he has declared in letters and essays to be his position regarding the sufficiency of art and language—and ultimately of words—to represent or reveal truth; though he works out ideas concerning language that are also present in *Perelandra*, his final suggestion concerning the efficaciousness of language in *Till We Have Faces* differs somewhat from his earlier conclusions. This statement on language can be seen in an investigation of key scenes in Book Two of the novel, the climactic section in which Orual discovers the inaccuracy of her initial written words.



### The Court of the Gods

In a key scene in Part II of *Till We Have Faces*, the novel's protagonist, Orual—at this point an “old crone”—finds herself standing in a sort of court of the dead, preparing to read aloud her “accus[ation] of the gods,” the explanation she has so carefully crafted detailing “all” the gods have “done to [her] from the very beginning” (*Faces* 289,3). Lewis's emphasis on written words and on writing as two related means of representing truth converges at this point, as Orual discovers that the roll she proceeds to read before the gods is not the narrative she has “worked on . . . day after day,” tediously laboring to accurately record the events of her life, but is instead a “little, shabby, crumpled thing” (289, 293). This replacement book is at once “small[er]” than her original “great book,” and is written in a hand unlike her own, one that inspires “terror and loathing” in the queen, reminding her of the “snarl in [her] father's voice” and of the “ruinous faces . . . in the Ungit stone” (290). Although it might have been suggested earlier, this is the first clear statement in the novel indicating that Orual's book, the result of much labor, is not as “great” as she thinks. As she proceeds, largely against her will, to “read out” the “stuff” in the scroll, the smaller, tattered book—later affirmed as the true “speech which has lain at the center of [her] soul for years”—communicates more accurately than her own earlier version the words she has previously striven to speak in accusation against the gods for all they have done to her and to her sister (290, 294, 3). As Lewis points out in *Perelandra*, size is inconsequential, as her “great” book turns out to be false, and the childishly accusatory “vile scribble” of the second book is more valuable even than she

suspected her own book to be, providing both her real complaint and the “answer” to her demand of the gods to explain themselves (290, 294).

The insufficiency of Orual’s own book is revealed as she realizes that the “vile scribble” of the substitute book expresses “passions and thoughts” she had “forgotten,” or not recognized in her initial writing (290,253). Orual’s claim throughout the first part of her account is that the “black stone” goddess Ungit is the one who is “hungry, faceless,” and grasping, while Orual, in contrast, has shown Psyche a love, though “grave” and painful, that is in the lovely sister’s best interest (4, 234, 152). As she reads the tattered book before the great assembly of the dead, however, the “mean and . . . savage” letters are shown to be reflective of Orual’s unacknowledged and true motives (288). Orual articulates for the first time her preference to see Psyche “dead” rather than given “bliss and joy” from a source other than herself (291); in this way, her rambling, angry accusation of the gods reveals what she thought was love to have been thinly-veiled jealousy, as she accuses the gods of “stealing [Psyche’s] love from [her]” (292). The queen ultimately expresses her preference that her sister be “[hers] and dead” rather “than [the gods’] and immortal” (291). This final admission corroborates her much-earlier recognition that, though Psyche’s marriage to the god might be but a “fool-happy dream,” Psyche was truly “brightface” and “brimming over with joy,” while Orual’s bringing her sister down from the mountain was bringing her “down... into misery” (291, 278).

Orual’s true complaint thus does not indict the gods for wronging herself and her sister, but rather indicts her own actions, which are now revealed to have been more like the selfishness of which she accuses the goddess Ungit than the sisterly love she claims to have demonstrated toward Psyche. The words in which she painstakingly records her

account of the pain and injustice of her own experience are superseded by a complaint she has not intended to make, but which she discovers to be the unrecognized speech she has “been saying over and over” for years—one that indicts her rather than the gods, showing her to have been deceived and deceptive in what she has believed and written (294). As the gods must give her this fuller and more accurate truth in words she did not herself write, the implication is that, in the tale she has intentionally recorded, Orual’s own words have somehow insufficiently related the truth of her experience. Here and in other scenes in the novel’s second part, Lewis thus addresses the question of whether or not, and under what circumstances, language can suffice to communicate reality.

However, in keeping with his beliefs about language as stated in his letters, the treatment of words in *Till We Have Faces* never goes so far as to suggest that words are hopelessly faulty or incapable of expressing truth. The extremity of such an assertion would contradict the discovery of a man whose earliest experience learning language impressed upon him such a strong sense of the essential meaning of individual words, and so, though Orual’s story is inaccurate, it is successfully replaced in Lewis’s novel by the words of the gods, which *are* capable of communicating reality. While the queen of Glome finds her book in need of being “rewrit[ten] from the beginning,” the gods are able to supply her with a more accurate complaint that communicates what is “true” (253,300). In contrast to Orual’s failed attempt at sorting through and representing the truth, these gods successfully use words to shed light on Orual’s actual motives and true self through the tattered book “slipped . . . into [her] hand,” indicating that their words, buttressed by an understanding of the reality of her circumstances, are sufficient to enlighten Orual’s understanding (290). In fact, the complaint provided by the gods is

actually the true speech “dug . . . out of” Orual, as she cannot produce the correct words herself (294). As Donaldson points out, it is ironically because “neither Orual’s understanding of herself nor her understanding of the gods is directly accessible to her” that “both are mediated by her story, the story-within-story” (162). However, although these truths are mediated to her by story, it is ultimately through the gods’ act of storytelling, and their subsequent redirecting of Orual’s narrative that she is finally enabled to “know herself” and the gods. Her story is sufficient merely as a beginning, before the gods take up *their* “own pen” to write the truth in her mind (*Faces* 254).

It is because the gods have understanding of Orual’s true motives and the reality of Psyche’s circumstances that they are able to place the tattered book in Orual’s hand and “force” her to “utter” the words she “really mean[s]” (294). As Orual’s “divine Surgeons,” the gods supply words that suffice to communicate truth, and Lewis thus demonstrates, in the “vile scribble” provided by the gods, the potential for words to communicate truth with a more complete accuracy. He also develops, however, a problematic situation that raises the question concerning the circumstances under which language might be used to accurate effect.

### The Language of Experience

These suggestions that Orual’s words have perhaps not accurately represented the truth begin to present themselves to her in experiences recounted in the initial chapter of her second book. Lewis here first raises the question of the efficacy of her own words in retelling experience, bringing her writing into question through her interactions with the

eunuch Tarin and with Ansit, Bardia's wife. In Orual's discussion with Tarin, in which Tarin's remembrance of Redival sheds new light on the queen's experience, she begins to realize that the "past" she has "[written] down was not the past that [she] thought [she] had...been remembering" (*Faces* 253). In accordance with the details she has recorded in her first book, she recognizes that "it had become [incorrectly] settled in [her] mind...that [she]," and not Redival, "was the pitiable and ill-used one" (256). Until this conversation, Orual's understanding of her childhood has not extended to include such possible realities as Redival's loneliness, the suggestion of which, through interaction with Tarin, prompts the queen to begin questioning other elements of her tale that she has "settled" as fact in her mind, and opens up to her the possibility that she may have misinterpreted certain circumstances in her life (256).

Lewis here indicates that it is not the inability of words to express, but instead her misunderstanding of the circumstances that leads Orual—inaccurately, as we see in the Court of the Gods—to attribute Psyche's experience with the god of the Mountain first to "madness," unreal "fancy," and the deception of a brute, and later to the "hate" and "punishment" of the gods (122,123,175). Her book, as an "accus[ation]" of the gods, and particularly of the "god who lives on the Grey Mountain," is an inaccurate representation of reality, and does not suffice as a substantial argument, not necessarily because the words themselves are insufficient tools to communicate truth, but because Orual's understanding of her circumstances and world has been faulty (3).

This inability to fully interpret events in the world around her is indicated, as well, first in Orual's glimpsing of Psyche's palace, and later in the veiling of her own face. Unable to conceive the goddess Ungit as one who "give[s] great comfort," Orual cannot

“read” her circumstances or correctly perceive the truth of her world (272); she only believes Ungit to be vengeful and cruel. She therefore cannot believe that the god of the mountain can possibly be good or beautiful, which Psyche claims he is. This misunderstanding ultimately blinds Orual to the reality of such things as Psyche’s palace and the food and drink she offers. The queen instead perceives her sister’s reference to these objects as madness, an illusion in her deceived sister’s mind. When Orual does finally see the palace—the complicating element that Lewis felt it necessary to add to the original myth—she is unable to conceive it as either a “true seeing” to corroborate Psyche’s story or a “sign” of the actual goodness of the gods (133); as she herself confesses—and more insightfully than she realizes—there is a “cloud over [her] mortal eyes,” though it seems here to be her own obstinacy of will, rather than complete inability to comprehend, that prevents her from believing Psyche according to the evidence, as she reduces this vision—admittedly impossible to “imagine”—to another “riddle” (133, 132). It seems that, in her unwillingness to admit her true nature and the possibility of the gods’ goodness (though she is inarguably and on her own irremovably under the cloud) Orual in some way keeps herself from understanding or “reading” the world around her.

In an action that is symbolic along the same vein, Orual is the one who first veils and then “unveil[s]” her face as a “means to be unknown” (278). With a stroke of irony, Lewis causes the protagonist to veil her face in the point at which she, in a sense, gives herself over to a less combative and more accepting ignorance of her circumstances and inaccurate accusation of the gods. He then has her veil removed just as she begins, through the enlightening conversations with Ansit and Tarin, to become “unveiled” in the

faulty understanding of her life-long circumstances that has kept her words from effectively achieving their purpose of condemning the gods (278).

If the tale of Orual, Psyche, and the gods is a sort of picture of the human experience in the Christian myth, then the revelation necessary for Orual to understand herself and, in Book Two of the novel, to be able to retell her story more accurately is given greater significance by Lewis's personal account of his own confrontation with the dying God of the Bible. Lewis expresses a growing understanding of books after "embrac[ing] the Christian revelation," suggesting that his previous inability to understand the meaning communicated in stories resided in his lack of knowledge of fundamental truths, rather than in any deficiency in the stories themselves. Similarly, the source of the problem in Orual's inability to use language accurately lies not in the capability of words, but in the underlying knowledge of the writer (*Letters* 331). In Lewis's own words, she is "under the cloud" regarding knowledge of the "true God," or the deities of her world (*Letters* 462). And, just as the central meaning in stories was established for Lewis after his own revelation, Orual gains ability to express truth through words only after her encounter with the gods. The limitation in Orual's ability to communicate accurate truth through her story thus serves as an accurate illustration of Lewis's suggestion, reflected elsewhere in his writings, that effective use of language and accurate understanding of circumstances are intimately connected. Orual is incapable of representing her experience accurately because she, at this point, lacks the necessary knowledge and understanding of her circumstances.

There is further suggestion here, however, of a type of fall similar to the Fall central to the Christian myth and its significance in connection with Orual's

communication—or miscommunication—of her experience through story. In *Perelandra*, Lewis seems to work out the effects of fallenness on language as somewhat—though not completely—corrupting, leaving word and story as a necessarily imperfect, yet sometimes-effective tool for communicating truth. Ransom’s efforts to communicate the concepts of “bent” things, such as the pain of cutting oneself or the existence of death on Earth, are hindered because of the difference between the two individuals’ experiences, the difference of which is due to the fall of earthly man. Lewis, however, also offers in Ransom’s story the hopeful suggestion, echoing his confidence in *Studies in Words*, that men may “find” their “own ways of palliating [the] defect in the instrument,” and in this way might be able, not to themselves redeem language, but to use language to some good, if not perfect effect (313, 314). In its post-lapsarian state, language in *Perelandra* has not lost all traces of goodness or redemption.

In Orual’s individual case, however, it seems that her understanding of her world—and thus the conclusions of her story—will remain more decidedly incorrect if left only to her own efforts at interpreting and telling. Her words literally must be given to her by the gods in order to communicate accurate meaning, and no effort on her part will do any more than begin the process of revelation that the gods must ultimately effect and complete. This is significant further in connection with the Fall in the Christian myth: the same complication of simultaneous responsibility and inability seems to be present: in some sense, Orual seems to play an active role in deciding not to read the “signs” of the gods or believe Psyche’s story, as evidenced in her reaction to the palace vision. It is also clear, however, that she cannot know or communicate the true nature of the gods (or herself) until they reveal that information to her.



Within this construct of the gods' lifting of the cloud, however, the novel might be seen as stopping short of rendering Orual's words here as entirely futile. Though there is less hope here than in Lewis's letters that Orual might communicate the thing she intends, Lewis expands upon his prior statements about the efficacy of language to add, as previously expressed, an epistemological dimension to the role words play in Orual's experience. Despite the tension between the sufficiency of the gods' words and Orual's incomplete telling of her experience, the novel, and Orual's interactions with Tarin and Ansit in particular, do indicate that her attempts at representing the truth through writing unfold to some good purpose. Although the book Orual intends to read as her complaint is revealed to actually be selfish "babble," rather than the argument she "think[s] [she] mean[s]," Lewis suggests that her attempts, both initial and final, are not ultimately worthless or unnecessary (*Faces* 294). On one hand, Orual cannot attain complete understanding on her own and thus remains "all but certain" that she will "fail" in giving a sufficient account of accurate history through her words (256). However, the "continual labor . . . of sifting and sorting" through the elements of her life, "separating motive from motive and both from pretext," serve a significant and useful purpose in Orual's ultimate epistemological revelations (256).

After her interaction with the gods, the queen recognizes that the first "writing" of her book "wrought in [her] a change which . . . was only a beginning," a preparation, for what she would later fully learn (253). Even before the gods confront Orual with a more complete vision of reality, her own writing enables her to work through her circumstances in a way that awakens attenuated "Memory," which "play[s] the tyrant" on her long-fostered emotions and beliefs. When Tarin indicates that the harshly-judged

Redival was actually “lonely” in childhood, Bardia’s wife Ansit suggests that Orual’s treatment of her beloved counselor has been “nine-tenths hatred” under the guise of love (255); consequently, the sleeping thoughts and feelings stirred by Orual’s writing endeavor, together with personal interactions in her life, leave her unable to deny that the “bittersweet pleasure” she took in her treatment of Bardia was akin to the harsh, “all-devouring” love of the goddess Ungit (266, 276). As a result, Orual is able to recognize newly-illuminated truths about herself when circumstances such as her interactions with Tarin and with Bardia’s wife begin to confirm suspicions that her understanding has not, in fact, been complete (253). In this way, though it cannot entirely unveil her face, Orual’s writing is sufficient and even necessary for effecting the “beginning” of change in her understanding, a foundation upon which the gods build the story that is true, with words that ultimately enable her to fully see her actual feelings and motives (253).

### Visions and Dreams

After Orual meets with Ansit and Tarin, and consequently begins to question her interpretation and written account of her own experience, she finds herself in the midst of circumstances in which she “cannot well discern dream from waking nor tell which is the truer” (276). These visions serve as further experiences that lend understanding of her past, and as instruments—and in some ways metaphors—providing further insight into Lewis’s position on language (276). Though she cannot determine whether they are “what men call real or what men call dream,” Orual refers to these visions as “spears and water-spouts of truth from the very depth of truth” (277). In his article “Myth Became

Fact,” Lewis describes the abstract and less realistic story that works in a similar way, often as a more effective avenue for truth, as “Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley,” communicating not necessarily “truth but reality” (“Myth” 66). Although she does not truly understand her circumstances or become “beautiful” alongside her sister until she first receives her very words from the gods and then meets the god of the mountain face to face, like the writing of her first book, these visions work on Orual to prepare the way for full and accurate realization of truth (*Faces* 307).

The first of these visions involves the queen’s long-dead father, who, entering her “chamber” while she “rest[s],” takes her to the “Pillar Room” (273, 274). In the past, this has been the place in the Palace where he has taken Orual to “his great mirror” in order to emphasize, according to her outward “goblin” appearance, her unworthiness of the gods (62). As Orual leaves her chamber with the King, he forbids her to “put on [her] veil” when she reaches for it, labeling it “folly” (274). When Orual then “follow[s] him . . . into the Pillar Room,” she “[becomes] very afraid because [she feels] sure he [is] looking for” his “mirror” to lead her again before it (274). Although the King’s purpose in bringing Orual here is first to “break up the paved floor” with “picks” and to “throw” themselves into another Pillar Room through the “dark hole . . . beneath the floor,” Orual’s initial fear at his command reveals her growing knowledge of herself as Ungit and also serves as the first of several pictures of Lewis’s statements on language (274).

Orual’s dream-like experience operates as a sort of foretelling of what the gods will soon do to her, as they also bring her before a sort of mirror, first in the words they provide her to read, “at last” revealing her “real voice” (292). By means of the Fox, the

gods then lead Orual before a set of “stories” that are “painted” on the “walls,” and Orual again fears that the Fox is “leading [her] to a mirror as [her] father had twice done” (297, 298). Though beautiful to Orual, the pictures on the wall also reveal truth to her, as she gains a clearer understanding through the vignettes of what the gods have actually been doing in her and Psyche’s lives. The stories of the gods thus corroborate the truth she has learned about herself through the replaced scroll, which also functions as a kind of “mirror” in which her “perfect image” can be seen (61). Though it is an inaccurate representation of her true motives and words, Orual’s initial writing plays a role, as well, in this illumination of her true self; though Orual does “not... see clearly many things” even after finishing her original book, it is this “very writing” that “[begins] the change” in her understanding of reality, which the gods then use to prepare her for their mirrors and thus to show her final truth (253).

In the vision, Orual’s father finally leads her again to his “mirror on the wall,” as well, and as the “walls” of the lowest room “clos[e] in on” and “smother” Orual, the reflection shows her face to be the “face of Ungit,” while the King also forces her to confess that she “is Ungit” (275, 276). Ready to believe this truth because of her earlier interactions with Tarin and Ansit, Orual is here further prepared to accept the true words that she will be given before the court of the gods, and to admit that her love for Psyche has been grasping and demanding, rather than selfless and giving. In this way, Lewis shows language to be a sort of mirror that is able to partially reveal to the individual his or her true motives and identity, though it is the accurate telling of the gods that is able to wholly reveal reality to Orual.

The Queen's half-real experiences go on, and she eventually finds herself "walk[ing] straight into [a] vision" of a "bright and great river" and a "flock—of sheep" by "merely opening a door" (283). Like the mythological Psyche, Orual in this scenario is given a task: she must "steal . . . one golden flock," or piece of wool, off the side of one of the sheep in order to "have beauty" (283). As she approaches this task incorrectly, seeking "in vain" to "[meet] the joyous and terrible brutes," she is instead "trampled" and unable to attain the golden wool (283). In another dream, Orual must "sift and sort" through her experiences as though they comprise a "huge, hopeless pile of seeds" (256). This "labour" of "separating" both seeds and personal motives, like her endeavors to obtain a piece of golden wool and to "change [her] ugly soul into a fair one," is "all but certain" to "fail" (256). In both scenarios—the vision of the rams and the dream of sifting the seeds—Orual finds herself responsible for completing tasks which are nearly impossible, or which she does not know the correct method of doing. The vision of the rams thus lends further significance to the dream of "labouring" as a "little ant" to sort and carry the seeds, and both lessons reflect back upon Orual's drive to write, and the question of whether or not—and how—the task is possible (256).

While Orual knows from the outset that the task of "searching, peering, picking up" and placing seeds is nearly "impossible," her attitude toward the river and the wool is more positive, and the task ultimately proves itself vain only according to her understanding of the situation and her consequent means of dealing with it (256). Though the rams come near to "destroy[ing]" Orual in their "rush[ing] over" her, "they [do] not kill" her, and she even "live[s] and [knows herself]" after they have "gone over" her (284). The problem with her circumstances is not that the task required of her is

impossible, but that she does not have the right information or a correct understanding of what is required; this is illustrated by the other woman in the field who, by contrast, successfully “glean[s] . . . a rich harvest” of golden wool off of the hedge, having waited until the rams passed by to gain her treasure (284). Seeing the woman win “without effort what utmost effort would not win for” her, Orual, frustrated, “despair[s]” of ever becoming beautiful of soul (284).

However, both for her specific circumstances and for the question of language’s efficacy, the suggestion in these two visions, and again within the construct of knowledge-endowing gods, is slightly more hopeful than she recognizes. The labour of sorting the seeds, though “all but certain” to “fail” is not *entirely* “certain” to fail, and the task of gathering the “golden flock” is only unsuccessful because she has gone about the endeavor in the wrong way (256, 257, 283). Both for Orual’s desire to be lovely and for the matter of language being able to communicate truth accurately, the suggestion is ambiguous: on one hand, both are possible; but without understanding, which cannot be achieved on one’s own, the endeavor will be one of much painful and futile effort. Orual’s goal of “mend[ing]” her “soul” by “set[ting] out boldly each morning to be just and calm and wise in all [her] thoughts and acts” proves impossible “unless the gods [help]” (282).

Orual ultimately fails in her initial efforts at writing her true story and at making herself beautiful of soul, presenting an instance of failure to “describe the *thing*” she has labored so long to “[get] across” in words (*Letters* 456). However, Lewis also seems to corroborate here what he develops in Orual’s later interactions with the gods, as he refrains from rendering Orual’s attempts to communicate completely worthless. On the

one hand, like Orual with the “all but certain” failure of sorting the seeds, Lewis nearly despairs at having “one or two sentences . . . out of a dozen books” that get the intended idea across (*Faces* 257; *Letters* 456); on the other, Lewis also communicates here that this task of representing truth through the written word—though “all but certain” to fail—is in fact an effort that is entirely “worth doing” (*Faces* 257; *Letters* 456). The difficulty of the task thus is not inherent, perhaps, in the task itself, but is a result of the individual’s misunderstanding of self and circumstances. The result is a tension between hope and frustration concerning the endeavor of writing: the endeavor may succeed (being not entirely “certain” to fail), but its success is dependent upon outside revelation, lacking which Orual cries in frustration, needing the “help” of the gods, and not—or not yet—receiving it (282).

In fact, it is a “vision separated distinctly from “dream” that Orual next “walk[s] into . . . with [her] bodily eyes wide open,” and which becomes her final and monumental, life-changing experience (*Faces* 285). In this vision, in which she finds herself “walking over burning sands, carrying an empty bowl,” her task is again one of the original Psyche’s: she must fill her bowl with water from the “spring that rises from the river that flows in the deadlands” and “give it to Ungit” (286). Again convinced that the task is beyond her, that she “can never get up” the “great mountains” that rise before her to complete this labour, Orual is frustrated as she suddenly finds she is holding a book—*her* book—rather than the required bowl, just before she is brought in front of the “court” (286, 289). While she is initially under the impression that what she holds is a “bowl” that will enable her to accomplish the task of retrieving the “water of death” for Ungit, the suggestion is that the actual task required of her—to “know herself” and

become beautiful of soul and face, as well as unknowingly to “be Psyche,” and thus provide her sister assistance—has been the writing and reading of her book. This is true particularly as several pages later Orual’s “real voice” and Psyche’s true circumstances are revealed to her (286, 287, 292). Like the “empty bowl” that she believes she must carry, what Orual has previously believed to be true about the gods and about herself, and even the purpose with which she has written her complaint are revealed here neither as accurate understandings of reality nor as the necessary item with which she must accomplish her task (285).

The implication of the book’s being replaced by the bowl is twofold: first, Orual understands neither her true task nor her true state before the gods, still attempting without their help to attain beauty; and second, as indicated earlier, the gods must supply Orual with the words she needs for full revelation of her circumstances and herself. At any rate, words—even Orual’s “book full of . . . poison”—are not presented here as worthless (300); they instead suffice as greater tools than would logically suffice for the tasks required of the queen. And, though the gods must supply them to her, Lewis here sets words, language, and story in a place of central importance for the attainment of knowledge and truth.

### Pictures on the Wall

The treatment of words in *Till We Have Faces* is consistent with Lewis’s life-long position regarding language. In it, he presents language as a sometimes-limited medium for expressing certain concepts apart from any human inability to understand or



communicate through words. The gods of Orual's world recognize these inherent limitations and depart from the written word to illuminate the entirety of Orual's experience with Psyche and the god of the Mountain through vignettes on a wall (290, 297). After reading before the court of the gods, Orual finds herself in a pavilion with "walls...all painted with stories," and her apprehensions of being led "to a mirror" that will reveal her ugliness are in a sense realized (298, 297); the living art of the gods, a combination of picture and word, goes beyond what the words of the book could do to retell Orual's past more precisely, and it does so in a manner at once consistent with and yet different from her own account, showing her role in each situation to be other than what she thought it was. Orual sees that through her own experiences she has enabled her sister to refrain from throwing herself over the "river's edge," has helped her sister in the impossible task of sorting the seeds, and has drawn the rams away from Psyche so she can easily complete the task of "gather[ing] her bright harvest [of golden wool] . . . off the hedge at ease" (298-300). Through the accurate representation of both picture and word, Orual thus recognizes what she did not know before: namely, that in the life-long misery of which she complains she actually "bore nearly all [Psyche's] anguish" (300).

Finally, the "Lord," the god of the Mountain who judges Orual in the end, presents himself, without spoken language, as the answer to Orual's complaint and as the ultimate retelling of her story (308). In his presence, "words" will not "suffice" as explanation, and yet it is the answer of himself that is partially retold in the art on the wall and in Orual's true complaint, and which is initially, albeit inaccurately, comprehended through Orual's first writing (308). According to Lewis's metaphor, seeing that "all" in the pictures is "true," Orual is finally able to "meet" the gods "face to

face” (304, 294); she receives the answer she has so long demanded of them, having been given understanding of truth by their accurate telling, which she could not understand, and therefore could not write or “utter” on her own (294).

Although he does not here show the act of writing to be futile or suggest that language may not after all contain inherent and potentially true meaning, Lewis does illustrate here the sometime-inability of words to “describe” the necessary “thing” (*Letters* 456); the gods move beyond words to use pictorial representation and even physical presence not simply to communicate fact, but also to tell story in such a way that past motives and deeds are seen afresh and are more completely understood.

### Unrolling the Book Again

As indicated earlier, Orual’s own writings carry further significance, operating not only as a means of suggesting to her the various misunderstandings throughout her life, but also as the very “pen” the gods “[use] . . . to probe her wound” (254). The “divine Surgeons” use her careful efforts at “sifting and sorting” past “motives” as preparation for the “work” they ultimately do in her life, using the pieces of truth she uncovers as preparation for the fuller knowledge they give her through the substitute complaint and in the pictured vignettes (266, 256). The “strange bread” the gods give Orual makes sense because it is built upon her prior attempts to find her “real voice” (281, 292). Just as Orual does not die after her trampling by the golden rams, but “live[s] and [knows]” herself after “they [have] gone over” her, she is finally confronted by the truth of her life, and by the gods themselves—yet without dying—because her previous sifting through

her experience has prepared her in smaller ways to recognize the larger truth she could not attain on her own (284).

Though Orual remains unknowing of herself throughout the miserable experiences she recounts on her own, the final revelation of her identity as both Ungit, “ugly” of “soul,” and “also...Psyche,” beautiful of face, is readily received, as she has been prepared for such enlightenment by the “passions and thoughts” stirred up through her writing and further provoked by Tarin and Ansit’s tales (281-282, 253). The earlier prophecy of the gods that Orual “shall know [herself] and [her] work” is consequently fulfilled, as her unintentionally recalled “follies” enable her to believe the gods’ verdict on and explanation of her life (174, 170). Lewis indicates in this way that writing is not only useful for gleaning bits of truth from Orual’s own memory, but also for “prepar[ing]” her to receive the entire and sufficient truth from those whose understanding enables them to explain it to her (253). The tediousness of sorting and sifting events to keep a written record is made valuable, not only as a means of revealing unrecognized discrepancies in thought and understanding, but also as the tool by which the necessary foundation is laid to receive ultimate knowledge of self and experience.

In *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis thus provides some answers to the question of the capability of words to communicate truth. In doing so, he addresses a deeper issue within the question of the accuracy of words: it is either a presence or lack of understanding that enables language to or prevents it from accurately representing reality. Lewis further does not allow the reader to assume that any inaccuracy in words renders them completely useless, as the novel’s two-part structure—the first part being Orual’s inaccurate complaint and the second her amendment—illustrates. In Orual’s enduring

sense of urgency to write, “unroll[ing] [her] book again” to supplement her original argument, and even asserting that if she were able, she would “rewrite” her tale “from the beginning,” Lewis allows words to be corrected not only by the gods’ revelation, but also with Orual’s own words after revelation (253). And this correction of Orual’s in the second part of the book is clearly meant to come so close to an accurate rendering of her experience as to negate any skepticism regarding the sufficiency of this endeavor at rewriting. Furthermore, although Orual’s words are authoritative as an accurate communication of her experience only after the verbal and pictorial revelation from the gods, they are shown to be useful and necessary along the way as epistemological vehicles, bringing about understanding of self and circumstances.

However, this is the point at which Lewis’s treatment of storytelling and word-craft in *Till We Have Faces* diverges from his earlier stated beliefs and his working out of language and story in *Perelandra*. It is suggested in the earlier novel that writing is not only “important and effective” at times, but is also “worth doing” throughout a lifetime in the positive hope that “a fraction” of the “*thing*” described can be accurately “[gotten]...into words” (*Studies* 314; *Letters* 361,456). But though she “[tries] . . . all [her] life” to understand her experience and later to accurately write her tale, Orual is ultimately incapable of “describ[ing] the *thing*” without depending on revelation from an outside source (*Letters* 456). However, in his letters and writings on words and in his depiction of Ransom’s experience with language, Lewis seems to express the more positive perspective that, at the very least, “one or two sentences” may “come near to getting” the intended idea “across” (*Letters* 456). The difference may seem slight, but his position in the later novel operates on the assumption that the gods possess accurate

understanding, and only *their* communication with Orual conveys an understanding complete enough to enable her to “add to” her first book in a sufficiently accurate recasting of her initial writing (*Faces* 253).

Consequently, if writing is presented in the novel as an essential process of getting at the truth, with words playing a key role in the epistemology of knowing self and circumstances, there is indication that this final and complete word of understanding must ultimately reveal itself outside of the writer’s capability to attain it. Through Orual’s writing and rewriting, Lewis suggests that some knowledge can be attained, and even conveyed, through her initial attempts to write. However, this knowledge is incomplete and insufficient for effecting a change from ugliness to beauty until she is given the whole word in her confrontation with the god of the Grey Mountain, who is “[himself] the answer” to her pursuit of understanding, against which “other . . . words” will not suffice (308).

### CHAPTER 3: THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF LEWIS'S VIEWS ON WORD, LANGUAGE, AND STORY

In *Perelandra*, Weston's view of reality opposes Ransom's in a way that reflects significantly on Ransom's, and ultimately Lewis's, views of language. At the tired end of their great chase at sea, Weston confides in his colleague that all he has been "trying to believe" throughout his life about the importance of the "human race" has been revealed to him as "nonsense" (167). The world for Weston is essentially meaningless, and what "happens... to the human race" does not ultimately "matter" (167). Weston and Ransom both agree in the idea that "something . . . is truer" than what they see, but the "other" for Weston is an enduring reality of oblivion, of "inner darkness" and death beneath the "rind" or thin "surface" of life, in which the "beauty of Perelandra, the innocence of the Lady, the sufferings of saints, and the kindly affections of men [are] only an appearance and outward show," while "Reality live[s]" in the "meaningless, the un-made, the omnipotent idiocy to which all spirits were irrelevant and before which all efforts [are] vain" (168, 180). Ransom's "other" is more akin to the water-people's "myth" of floating islands as clouds (162); the world for him continually returns to a central meaning and a greater life, the hints of which can be discerned in the tales and myths within the different worlds. The importance of establishing whether or not language represents real meaning and is capable of expressing that meaning lies in these polarized beliefs of Weston and Ransom: language is sufficient to express truth only if there is truth

to express, and Lewis's confidence in the capability of language to convey reality here indicates that there is a central, unchanging reality to be "gotten at."

Just as the character of Weston in *Perelandra* seeks to present an opposing view, challenging Ransom's ideas of inherent truth and of universal meta-narrative in his own deconstruction of meaning and meaningful story in the world, Carl Rapp, in the introduction to *Fleeing the Universal*, his critique of post-rational thought, addresses ideas about the possibility of rationality in a way that highlights certain dimensions of Weston's disagreement with Ransom and Lewis's philosophy on language and reality. The Un-man underscores truth by, in a sense, raising up the idea of self—and at the root, his own self—yet all the while subverting the significance of humanity. He does this by undermining and denigrating the universally meaningful elements of the world that make story and myth for Lewis both worthwhile endeavors and vessels of ever-deepening meaning and truth. Rapp describes deconstructionist views on language as expressions of a "new, linguistic version of the [transcendental] inquiry" into the "extent to which language does not simply *reflect* the thought it appears to convey but rather *determines* that thought" (3). In this way, he addresses a post-rational and deconstructive position on language that in some ways further explains Weston's denouncing of an existing and enduring meta-narrative that affirms the existence of reliable and unchanging truths about reality. Instead, the Un-man propounds an existence in which reality is defined by individual experience and historical movements, rather than by any enduring, foundational truth, just as the deconstructionist's view of language is one in which reality is defined by language, rather than the reverse. Just as Rapp describes the deconstructive thought that "language" must be both "determinative with respect to all possible objects

of thought or experience” and “*not*... determined, or dictated to, by anything outside itself,” Weston argues in his initial conversation with Ransom that the “whole cosmic process is moving” toward a final “goal” of “self-thinking, self-originating activity” (Rapp 4; *Perelandra* 92).

In this “more flexible posture” on meaning and truth, Weston continues to criticize the meta-narrative embraced by Ransom and Lewis in a way that affirms order and immutable meaning. At times he suggests a view that seems contrary to his position that everything is meaningless, even suggesting at one point that a meta-narrative does exist (Rapp 1); again, in contrast with Rapp’s presentation of post-rationalist thought, and deconstruction in particular as seeking “not to propound anything,” Weston does believe in, and here demonstrates this belief in, the attainment of “knowledge” and thus in “propounding” his own philosophy, having admittedly “wanted to know in order to achieve utility” in various ways (Rapp 10; *Perelandra* 89). In fact, Weston never attempts to claim that he is not intentionally developing a philosophy of life and existence, and, as a “biological philosoph[er],” developing one presumably based on scientific observation and methods, at that (90).

This admitted pursuit of knowing, however, brings him to a place that is in some ways again very like that of the post-rationalists Rapp criticizes. Though Weston purports a worldview, and one that is “Guided” by some sort of “purpose[ful]” “Force,” that force as he expresses it is one that would ultimately propel all things toward the nothingness, the anti-meaning and dissolution of “‘true’ and ‘false’” beneath the “surface” of observable seeming-reality (169). The meta-narrative defining reality for Weston is one that affirms lack of meaning, and posits a changing and evolving definition



of truth. On this basis, Weston criticizes the “adherence to formulae” that the “theological technicalities” of “organised religion” and scientific endeavors necessarily propound in order to explain reality (92, 91). He speaks to Ransom of a “final disengagement” of “spirit—mind—” and “freedom” toward which the “whole cosmic process is moving” (92). And though Weston regards this detachment from empirically discernible and unchangeable truth as something to progress toward and ultimately attain, the “goal” of “self-thinking, self-originating activity” that Weston purports and Rapp describes and criticizes seems oddly similar (92). At the very least, there seems to be an essential similarity between Weston’s theories and more recent post-rationalist thoughts concerning the lack of a meaning-infusing master story. And this is the point at which Lewis’s positions on language are presented as contrary to the “freedom” with which these other veins of thought would imbue any attempts at concretely defining reality or philosophizing spirituality and history (92).

In propounding a sort of master story, the greater significance of Weston’s argument is that he ultimately addresses whether or not that master story is a positive, life-affirming one. In accordance with Hegelian formulations, Weston “flees the universal,” as Rapp puts it, in allowing individual experience and perception to explain reality. But in so doing, he subverts the value of the individual human life. In embracing the idea of a meta-narrative that infuses the world and life with established meaning, Lewis on the one hand subordinates humanity under the glory of the creator and the creator’s divine purpose and order of things, and on the other simultaneously raises individual worth through the image of the “Great Dance” (*Perelandra* 218). In contrast, post-rational theory is a thought-system in which there is no existing meta-narrative, but

only what is created or instituted by the individual, the “spectacle of science, religion, and philosophy” being “constituted by the creative power of the Ego,” not by any underlying and significant truth, and therefore only “subordinate to the creative power of the artist, who may posit them or cancel them freely, without recourse to external authorizations” (Rapp 15).

On the other hand, as in of Lewis’s own position, Ransom presents a world that is at once comprehensible and rational, and in which, therefore, knowledge, experience, and indeed language may also be rationally comprehended and used. According to post-rational thinking, language can be viewed as powerful, but only insofar as it is used to define—and in that sense to create—fact. As Rapp suggests, people in the post-rational culture have “stop[p]ed] thinking in terms of grand interpretations or . . . master narratives,” implying that there are none and never were, but were just something created out of language for a season in time (6). This would seem to make language the only important reality, rather than, as Lewis purports, significant or important because it can be an expression of other, foundational reality and truth. Language is thus affirmed by Lewis as significant and meaningful, not according to its own ability to render meaning, but in its representation of meaning that already and invariably exists. The master narrative of which Weston is an unwitting, essential part is also the centrally universal truth that Lewis believes lends meaning to words and stories and which language and narrative in turn are capable of representing.

At one point in *Perelandra*, Ransom refers to Earth’s people as “tak[ing]” the early histories of the “first generations” of “long livers” as “only a Story or a Poetry,” meaning that they believe these to be false tales, or one of the “what-ifs” which the Un-

man attempts to propagate on Perelandra (221). Throughout the novel, the words “story” and “poetry” are used by the Un-man in particular as descriptions of something that is untrue or has not happened; Lewis instead works out the entire narrative of the novel as an explanation of how human Story, Poetry, and Myth are instead “gleams of celestial strength and beauty” that are in fact “based on a solider reality than we dream” (221, 201). Lewis’s conversion from his early disappointment that myths are merely lies, though lies “Breathed... through Silver,” is illustrated here, as he, together with Ransom, reaches the conclusion that the myths he loves are actually grounded in fact and pass through time as a “faint breath” of deeper reality that “reaches even the late generations” (*Tree 54, Perelandra* 201).

This expanding perspective of Lewis’s on language and story as inherently and historically meaningful and his belief in the ever-deepening significance of story is illustrated in a key scene in *Till We Have Faces*, and in the conclusion of his Narnia series. In the second book of Orual’s story, the queen has a vision in which her father, the King, leads her to the Pillar Room and forces her alongside him, with much “hard labour” and “pain,” to “break up the paved floor” and “Throw [herself] down” through the “dark hole” they find there (274). This happens a second time as they find themselves in a “smaller” Pillar Room “made . . . of raw earth” (274). After they dig again and continue to travel “further down,” beneath “hundreds of tons of earth,” for the second time in her life, Orual, without her veil, is finally led by the King before his “mirror on the wall,” and sees herself as she truly is: as “Ungit,” not only with her “ruinous face,” but as an “all-devouring, womblake, yet barren, thing” who has not loved as she thought she had, having “stolen” the “lives” of Psyche and Bardia in her selfish

attempts not to lose them (275, 276). Orual, the veiled queen who has been deceived about herself and her reality, must travel downward into “darker” rooms that “smother” and close in on her in order to be confronted with her true self (294).

The implication is that she has been in a state of darkened understanding and cannot experience the “art and joy” of knowing in order to successfully write the “very thing [she] really mean[s],” but must instead go farther and farther down into darkness in order to discover the harsh truth of who she really is and what her life has truly been (294). There is meaning beneath the crust of Orual’s life, but it is other than what she had thought, dark, disturbing, and downward-moving, not as the “fair” and beautiful “soul” she would seek to attain for herself (282).

Lewis makes a similar suggestion at the end of his seven-book series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As an illustration of his views not only on ultimate reality, but also on story and thus on language as well, Lewis presents a contrasting picture of the depth and nature of meaning at the end of the final book in the series, *The Last Battle*. After Aslan, with echoes of the Apocalypse, has destroyed the old Narnia and has “drawn” all of his true followers “into the real Narnia through the Door,” the humans and other sentient creatures find themselves in a land at once like the Narnia they have known, and yet “different from the old Narnia” (212). As the children begin to run throughout the country and finally the garden in which everything is said to have begun, they find themselves strangely within the same landscape as before, except more “beautiful” and brilliant, more “like the real thing” (210). The children continue to follow the Lion’s command by traveling “further up and further in,” finding this reaffirmative experience of Narnia’s beauty repeating itself in layers “like an onion”: each time they go “further up

and further in” and reach the same garden, they find that the “inside is larger than the outside,” and is increasingly “more real and more beautiful” than the original, old Narnia (206, 225, 224). One of the characters aptly explains that the “further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside” (224). Reality and truth in Narnia thus provide a model for Lewis’s presentation of story in *Till We Have Faces* and in *Perelandra*, continually increasing in depth of meaning.

However, the implication of this significant and ever-deepening master story—which Lewis certainly saw as underlying all other narratives—works out differently in relation to the efficacy of language in each novel. An illustration of this difference can be drawn from *Perelandra*. At one point in his examination of Weston’s manipulation of story, the Un-man is represented as an example of a teller of “bent” tales. Glover comments,

“There will be tale-tellers whose purpose is to please by artifice or clever craft. Others may have personal agendas they wish to circulate by incorporating them within an old story, using our familiarity with the original to lure us to bent meanings or conclusions. There are finally those who knowingly distort language, bend it to fit their aims with no remorse for wrenching meaning from language or significance from structure, thinking only to twist and warp both art and reality” (180-181).

Similarly, Orual also bends language in her admitted “agenda” to unveil the injustice of the gods. However, as her bending of word and story is instead a result of misunderstanding of truth rather than an intentional stripping of meaning from words, she presents a less hopeful picture of the state of language, or at least of human ability to use

it, in a post-lapsarian world. Intentionally or not, what Lewis seems to posit in *Till We Have Faces* is not that, if she had known how to look, Orual might have “read” her circumstances rightly, or understood the master story of her world to successful narrative effect, but that she cannot know the truth of her experience until, as Holyer states, she has a “clearer knowledge of herself” (57). While the meaning of her circumstances remains as a “riddle” to her, she is unable to know the truth, and ultimately the Divine, first because she seeks the answer to the wrong question—she would know the truth about the gods, when what she must first learn is the truth about herself—and second because the gods have not yet given her the knowledge she seeks (*Faces* 133). And over this “giving” of knowledge she has no control—the novel makes it clear that her frustrated attempts have no strong effect in swaying the will or enlisting the “help” of the divine (282). When they do finally bestow enlightenment and beauty, it is unclear whether or not Orual’s efforts or her requests for help have brought about the intervention in any way.

It can be said that Lewis does present in some ways a positive view of language’s role in the lifting of Orual’s cloud by means of language and story; he also illustrates through his retelling of the Cupid and Psyche myth, as in the universe of *Perelandra*, an underlying master story that potentially lends further, truthful meaning to language. While Holyer believes that Orual searches for an “adequate view of ultimate reality,” the foundational meaning that “may be,” in both *Perelandra* and *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis asserts meaning that unquestionably is, and is hidden not because it is dark, but because, apart from divine revelation, humanity is “under the cloud” (Holyer 74). In Orual’s experience, the lifting of that cloud, which is the attainment of understanding of herself

and the Divine, is brought about through words. And it seems that, as in his other writings, Lewis here proposes that the same understanding of reality and foundational meaning is true for us: words, language, and story are not only sufficient, but often—and not always!—ideal vehicles by which the real Master Story may be best presented and revealed.

However, although in a number of ways *Till We Have Faces* endeavors to present a picture of hopeful redemption, of ugliness made beautiful and foolishness made wise, it does not go so far as to present a human character who, with a lifetime of attempts, can rise by literary means, even in small ways, above the place in which her blindness holds her. She certainly cannot go any further than to “get even a fraction of it into words,” which is what Lewis—in his letters, in *Perelandra*, and in other writings on words—seems to hope for himself, his students, or his friends and colleagues (*Letters* 361). This later development of Lewis’s conception of the existing meta-narrative within his beloved myths and its implications for the efficacy of language are thus worked out with less confidence in *Till We Have Faces* than in the novels of his earlier space trilogy. He in this way leaves less room in Orual’s tale than in Ransom’s for elements of the master story, the “transcendent,” to be discovered by the individual—apart from divine intervention—and used to positive effect through language and story.

CONCLUSION: SPECULATION ON LEWIS AND TOLKIEN'S INFLUENCE ON  
EACH OTHER CONCERNING STORY AND LANGUAGE

In *Till We Have Faces*, Orual must travel from the “smothering” depths of the truth about herself into rooms that become increasingly “smaller” than the previous rooms before the truth of the gods can ultimately be revealed to her. In *The Last Battle*, the children of the Narnia tales, in contrast, are able to go “further *up* and further in” to realize increasingly a “deeper, more wonderful” truth that continually affirms itself (213). Lewis here indicates his position that there is unchanging and enduring truth about self and about the surrounding world. Thus, while Orual must first go increasingly down to realize her true identity, still darkened in her understanding of the truth of her world, and thus deceived regarding the truth about herself, the children having already met the Lion face to face and having consequently understood themselves in relation to him are able to travel up and up to realize even more fullness of truth and depth of meaning. As Lucy describes it, the children are able to discover “world within world,” being a living part of the “Great Story . . . which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before (225, 228).

In the same way, and for the same reason, Lewis’s view on language and story—for the most part consistently expressed—is one in which the reader is able to discover meaning “at the center of books,” just as Lewis himself discovered it mid-way through his life (*Letters* 331). For Lewis, this meaning as contained within story and potentially



communicated by language unfolds “like an onion,” and is ever-increasing in ultimately positive and good significance, just as the reader, a seeker of truth, can look into the stories and myths of history and go increasingly “further up and further in” to recognize the reality of the world in various and varying stories (*Battle* 225).

This confidence in a depth of meaning in stories is the ultimate outworking of the much earlier discussion between Lewis, Tolkien, and Dyson regarding both the historical and literary significance of the Christian story; Lewis’s subsequent connection between the Christian myth as fact and the capability of language to communicate meaning was the “natural step” that he took in his linguistic philosophy (*Surprised* 205). And just as Tolkien played such a significant role in these developing beliefs about story and language, in the 1931 conversation with Lewis demonstrating his own confidence in the significant meaning underlying fairy-stories, so also the question is raised concerning the consistency or development of his own stated beliefs on the efficacy of language, and to what degree he, as well, successfully worked out his own beliefs about language and the significance of story in his fictional endeavors.

In an extension of his theories on language, Tolkien “believed” alongside Lewis “that . . . myths were true,” and his fiction also reflects an appreciation for the power of words and their capability to express aspects of the larger meta-narrative (Shippey 315). For example, Tom Bombadil in Tolkien’s *Fellowship of the Ring* is able to defeat beings and powers that wield death in service to the “dark lord” because “*His songs are stronger songs*” (139). Neither is he under the vanishing spell of the One Ring, as the hobbits are astonished to discover when he “put[s] the Ring round the end of his little finger” and “there [is] no sign of [his] disappearing” (130). Tom is able to consider his comical—and

Frodo's irritated—antics with the "golden ring" a "game," "put[ting] it to his eye and laugh[ing]," as well as "[spinning] the Ring in the air" and causing *it* to "vanish" (131, 130). The answer to Tom's ability to consider so weighty and dark a matter as the Ring so lightly, and at the same time to powerfully "call" Frodo and his companions safely out of the "*cold stone* and "*dark door*" of the Barrow-wight lies in his answer to Frodo's question, "Who are you, Master?" and its connection to his "stronger songs" (140, 129). Tom responds to Frodo regarding his "name":

. . . you are young and I am old. Eldest, that's what I am . . . Tom was here before the rivers and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn. He made paths before the Big People, and saw the little People arriving. He was here before the Kings and the graves and the Barrow-wights. When the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless—before the Dark Lord came from Outside. (129)

Tom is not subject to the powers of the Ring and "has no fear" of the threatening powers of the world because he "is the Master," having a greater knowledge, by experience, of Middle-Earth's master story, as he has existed in "strange regions beyond . . . memory and beyond . . . waking thought," in "times when the world was wider, and the seas flowed straight" (122, 128). And although he claims that he is "not master of Riders from the Black Land far beyond his country" because "Out east [his] knowledge fails," the hobbits are persuaded that Bombadil "would know how to deal with Black Riders, if anyone did" (144). Tom's "songs are stronger songs" than those of even the ancient and dead followers of the dark lord because he knows, intimately and

experientially, the greater story of his country's history, and is therefore, in a sense, larger than, or perhaps outside of even the great powers currently at work in his world. Tom Bombadil tells stories that instill in the hobbits "vision[s]" of the past and sings songs that effect for his friends "escape from drowning" because of the "great expanse of years behind him," which imbues him with knowledge of his land's meta-narrative, and consequently with knowledge and power within the story unfolding in his present experience (142, 140).

Ultimately, as Tolkien played such an admitted and influential role at a key time in Lewis's life and career, we might speculate on the longer-term influence upon each others' developing views of language and story, as expressed in the two writers' works. At any rate, throughout his fictional endeavors and his letters, Lewis presents a view of language as an instrument that, though perhaps imperfect and not always the most appropriate vehicle, is sufficient under certain circumstances and conditions to communicate reality and truth. Those circumstances do vary in the two novels considered here, and thus reflect somewhat differently on the state of language in a world that Lewis knows to be post-lapsarian. His ideas on language in *Till We Have Faces* in particular present a position on human use of language that seems to depart from not only his statements in other novels, but also in his letters and essays addressing the matter of words. However, though he indicates in *Till We Have Faces* and even somewhat in *Perelandra* that the task of writing may not always produce an accurate account of reality, he also seems to say that the effort is worth doing. Ultimately, his position on words as capable tools for communicating truth stems from his underlying worldview of an existing master narrative, by which words and language receive the meaning and

power with which they can then successfully communicate, and hopefully tell the stories that not only “get . . . a fraction of [the intended meaning] into words,” but also proceed to maintain a “center” that contains some significant elements of the world’s foundational master story (*Letters* 456, 331).

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