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# Schwartz's "C.S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy" - Book Review

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**C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy.** By Sanford Schwartz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-19-537472-8. Pp. 240. \$27.95:

In *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, Sanford Schwartz presents a bold and intriguing thesis that, if accepted, will alter significantly the way we read Lewis' space trilogy. In fact, his book attempts to do for the Trilogy what Michael Ward's recent *Planet Narnia* (Oxford University Press, 2008) did for the *Chronicles*: Schwartz claims to have discovered an underlying unity in the series unnoticed by previous scholars. Schwartz, a scholar of twentieth-century Modernism and self-described latecomer to Lewis, has perhaps been able to see the books in fresh ways because he approaches Lewis' works from a different background and critical perspective. This is not to say that Schwartz has not done his homework: he acknowledges his debt to Lewis scholars like Peter Schakel, Alan Jacobs, David Downing, Doris T. Meyers, and Charles Huttar, many of whom read his work and offered their criticism and advice. While Schwartz's work enhances our appreciation of Lewis' trilogy in multiple ways, two major aspects of his thesis stand out: he argues that the Trilogy is more integrated and unified than has previously been assumed, and he presents their author as one deeply engaged with the modern intellectual revolution, contrary to Lewis' self-styled image as an "intellectual dinosaur stranded in the modern world" (8).

Schwartz begins by placing the space trilogy firmly in context, both of Lewis' literary career and social events. Specifically, he notes that the three novels (*Out of the Silent Planet*, 1938; *Perelandra*, 1943; and *That Hideous Strength*, 1945) were written during Lewis' most prolific writing period which saw him move from an academic, relatively unknown beyond the lecture halls of Oxford, to something of a celebrity in Britain and the rest of the English-speaking world because of his religious apologetic writings. Schwartz also places the books in the context of World War II, noticing, for example, that the setting for the first novel is, appropriately enough, the planet named for the god of war and that the violent conditions of the time are imprinted on the novels themselves.

Schwartz correctly points out, however, that, in spite of the physical violence in which the hero of all three novels, Elwin Ransom, participates, Lewis is more

concerned with ideological warfare, specifically the "seemingly impassable conflict between Christian tradition and the evolutionary or 'developmental' tendencies of modern thought" (6). Schwartz clarifies further that Lewis was "less concerned with the prospect of subhuman ancestry than with a conceptual apparatus that consigns other human beings to subhuman status, or summons up an 'evolutionary imperative' to legitimate the suspension of time-honored ethical norms" (6). In this regard, Schwartz shows how *Out of the Silent Planet* reflects the contemporary concerns in Europe over the rise of Nazism, and that Lewis' fictional explorations allow him to warn prophetically against the possibilities of racial genocide and eugenic experimentation that came to pass in World War II and the following decades.

Schwartz states that he intends his study to serve as a guide for readers through each of Elwin Ransom's adventures and to provide commentary on the series as a whole. His book's structure reflects this intention, devoting a chapter to each novel and including an appendix discussing the unfinished story posthumously published as *The Dark Tower*. While Schwartz acknowledges his debt to earlier full-length studies of the Trilogy by Martha Sammons, David Downing, and Jared Lobdell, he also argues for the originality of his approach embodied in three distinctive premises that undergird his discussions of the novels. First, Schwartz suggests that the three novels share the same narrative structure. His second foundational premise is that each novel presents and parodies a different evolutionary model, namely that the developmental paradigm ascends from "materialist" (first book), to "organic" or "vitalist" (second book), to a "spiritual principle" in the third book (7). Finally, Schwartz asserts that "each of the providentially governed communities with which Ransom is associated" (unfallen Mars and Venus in the first two novels and the manor of St. Anne's in the finale) is constructed "not as the polar opposite but the transfiguration or 'working up' of the specific phase of the evolutionary model to which it stands opposed" (7-8).

Using *Perelandra* as his model, Schwartz suggests that the three novels share essentially the same structure. He points out, for example, how that structure relates to the hero, Elwin Ransom: Schwartz identifies a turning point in all three novels when "the previously passive protagonist" finds himself in a situation that demands "personal decision, a commitment to violent action, and a reckoning with the prospect of death" (9).

In addition to this structural unity, Schwartz also identifies a unifying sequencing that informs the three novels. In his scheme, each novel represents a different view of evolutionary development theory. Specifically, *Out of the Silent Planet* presents the popular materialist view of orthodox Darwinism; *Perelandra*, the creative or emergent evolution ideas of Henri Bergson; and *That Hideous Strength*, the self-transformation of man into "God almighty" (11). In this reading of the sequence of the novels, Schwartz departs significantly from the conventional wisdom that claims Lewis endows his other worlds of Mars and Venus with attributes

drawn from the medieval, Renaissance, or Neo-classic models and presents these worldviews as an alternative to the evolutionary models current in his own day. Schwartz, while not denying this view, suggests an alternate reading in which Mars can be viewed "not as the polar opposite but as the transfiguration or upgrading of the Wellsian war between the species" and the new Eden of *Perelandra* may be seen as a "sanctified version of Bergson's own creative evolution" (12). Schwartz explains: "In accord with his Augustinian view that 'bad things are good things perverted,' Lewis transforms first the 'materialist' and then the 'vitalist' views of evolution into 'unfallen' worlds that make their terrestrial counterparts appear as parodic distortions of unspoiled and divinely created originals" (12). Finally, even though *That Hideous Strength* is set on earth, Schwartz also sees the finale as participating in a similar kind of "taking up" as the first two.

As stated earlier, Schwartz's views represent a significant departure from conventional approaches that have read the space trilogy as a sharply defined struggle between the religious and naturalistic points of view. While not discounting this view entirely, Schwartz suggests viewing the conflict in these novels "not as a clash between antithetical principles but as a relationship between 'archetype' and distorted 'copy'" (17). Similarly, *That Hideous Strength* has long been regarded as the odd book out in the Trilogy and as a "Charles Williams novel by C. S. Lewis" (Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, 205). In this conventional reading, critics have conceived the rival powers in terms of a "sheer antithesis between religious and naturalistic worldviews, or medieval romance and modern realism" (16-17). By contrast, Schwartz argues that Lewis' work should be viewed "not as a casual dismissal of the modern imaginary but as a searching exploration of its possibilities" (18). Schwartz summarizes this key argument in his thesis as follows:

With an appropriate adjustment of our optic, we may begin to see his Space Trilogy less as the irreconcilable struggle between an old-fashioned Christian humanism and a newfangled heresy and more as the efforts of modern Christian writer to sustain and enrich the former through critical engagement with the latter. (18)

Schwartz's argument is complex, and I found myself having to reread passages in the book multiple times to grasp it, particularly in the chapter discussing *That Hideous Strength*. I found his readings of *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra* insightful, and one of the strengths of the book is the scientific and cultural background the author provides on evolutionary theories and Bergson's vitalism. This material helps to support Schwartz's claim that Lewis was doing more than reacting negatively to modern developmental theories. By extension, Schwartz wants to reclaim Lewis' image from his self-described dinosaur stance and present Lewis as one who engaged critically the intellectual currents of his day. While this corrective view of Lewis has value, the fact remains that it is hard to read very far

in Lewis' writings without encountering his distaste for many aspects of modern science, philosophy, and literature. Perhaps Schwartz would see these instances as a rhetorical stance on Lewis' part, but this claim is one that would seem to require more evidence before we accept it wholesale. His reading of *That Hideous Strength* is also insightful, especially his suggestion that what Lewis transposes or "takes up" is the Gothic genre, which itself is a parody of Medieval Romance. This approach has numerous interpretive strengths; yet, it was not clear, to this reader at least, how the approach demonstrates the essential unity or sequencing related to developmental theories that is one of the book's key premises.

Overall, Schwartz does an admirable job of arguing and supporting his thesis. In the process, he illuminates the plot, structure, themes, and unity of the Space Trilogy in a way that will be valuable for readers of Lewis' science fiction. The book is well researched and exhaustively documented. For me, some of the most intriguing parts were those that dealt with Ransom as the hero of all three novels and his moral crises as important unifying elements in the structure and themes of the Trilogy. At the same time, I found Schwartz's efforts to fit *That Hideous Strength* into the patterns of character and structure identified in the first two novels to be somewhat forced, not least because Ransom's character seems to take a backseat in the finale when compared to his central role in the first two books. Still this reservation is minor compared to the overall success of Schwartz's argument, which is well supported and which makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of and appreciation for Lewis' achievement as a writer of science fiction and as a Christian intellectual responding to the cultural currents of his time.

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