

Out of the Silent Planet: Understanding Utopia

“Secondly, a more practical issue will arise when, if ever, we discover rational creatures on other planets. I think myself; this is a very remote contingency. The balance of probability is against life on any other planet of the solar system. We shall hardly find it nearer than the stars. And even if we reach the Moon we shall be no nearer to stellar travel than the first man who paddled across a river was to crossing the Pacific.

This thought is welcome to me because, to be frank, I have no pleasure in looking forward to a meeting between humanity and any alien rational species. I observe how the white man has hitherto treated the black, and how, even among civilized men, the stronger have treated the weaker. If we encounter in the depth of space a race, however innocent and amiable, which is technologically weaker than ourselves, I do not doubt that the same revolting story will be repeated. We shall enslave, deceive, exploit or exterminate; at the very least we shall corrupt it with our vices and infect it with our diseases.

We are not fit yet to visit other worlds. We have filled our own with massacre, torture, syphilis, famine, dust bowls and with all that is hideous to ear or eye. Must we go on to infect new realms?

Of course we might find a species stronger than ourselves. In that case we shall have met, if not God, at least God’s judgment in space. But once more the detecting apparatus will be inadequate. We shall think it just our bad luck if righteous creatures rightly destroy those who come to reduce them to misery.” – “The Seeing Eye” (Feb 1963)

“You will be both grieved and amused to hear that out of about 60 reviews only 2 showed any knowledge that my idea of the fall of the Bent One was anything but an invention of my own. But if there only was someone with a richer talent and more leisure I think that this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelization of England; any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it” – 9 August 1938 Letter to Sister Penelope CSMV

Utopias

Utopias imagine a better world over against the actual faulty ones. They act as a critique but also as a vision of what could be. Though some are conceived of as possible only in the future, most are conceived as possible, present worlds. They have as precedents Plato’s ideal republic, the Arcadian visions of Greece and Rome, the millennia visions of the Hebrew prophets and that of patristic and medieval Christianity. Yet they also often imagine a humanly possible world that can be achieved through human effort, reason, and self-restraint.

Thomas More’s *Utopia* was by no means the first utopian text in global (or even Western) history. But his text did play a predominant role and influence on many utopian writings that came after it. “Utopia” literally means “no place” (*ou + topos*) and echoes “good place” (*eu + topos*).

Lewis alludes to at least two utopian texts--Plato’s *Republic* and its three-level society of philosopher kings, soldiers, and craftsmen, and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* in which Gulliver is reluctant to reveal to the superior Brobdingnagians (and in similar fashion the Houyhnhnms) the extent of human corruption. Lewis also has in mind the scientism of several science fiction novels, including H. G. Wells’ *First Men on the Moon* and *The Time Machine*, which he openly refers to in the novel, as well as the spiritual-evolutionary visions of David Lindsay’s *The Voyage to Arcturus* and Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men*.

Sehnsucht: The Argument from Desire

“The Christian Way.—The Christian says, “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in

this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they were only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same.”

—“Hope” *Mere Christianity*

Sehnsucht is a German word not easily translated into English, for it means not only longing or desire, but longing or desire for the unfinished thing, perhaps the ideal—the far-off country, for example. It may contain feelings of nostalgia, but these can include such feelings for a place one has never visited or a person one has never met. Lewis often expressed the concept by the word “desire,” “beauty,” or “joy,” and he clearly associated it with feelings of the numinous, the holy, or the mystical. At the same time, Lewis warned that such feelings cannot be ends in themselves; they are pointers to God. Pursued for themselves they become idols and blockages. One must search for their source and author. In the same way, Lewis held Nature to point toward Heaven, our true divine home.

Discussion Questions

1. In what sense could Ransom be said to be on a pilgrimage?
2. How does fear, in particular fear inspired by H. G. Wells’ fiction, form a particular barrier to Ransom?
3. How does Ransom’s shift from a view of the solar region as Space to one of the Heavens change his understanding of things?
4. Is the meaning of Ransom’s name important to the novel in anyway?
5. Compare and contrast Weston’s scientism with Devine’s pragmatism and colonialism.
6. What is the ethical insight the *hrossa* hold concerning desire and refusing to repeat what one desires? Do you agree?
7. Published in 1938, is *Out of the Silent Planet* a war novel? Why and/or why not?
8. On page 144, Ransom suggests that the distinction between history and myth may not be a significant one on Malacandra. Why does he conclude this?
9. What is the meaning of the *hnakra* hunt in an “unfallen” world?
10. How does Lewis employ the angelic in the novel? What would the story be without it?

“Is Theology Poetry?” (6 November 1944)

Originally addressed to the Oxford Socratic Club, an undergraduate society for which Lewis served as the faculty mentor from 1942 until 1954 (when he left for Cambridge), Lewis quickly tightened the question he had been given and focused upon the specific relationship between systematic Christian theology and poetic material, “writing which arouses and in part satisfies the imagination,” in particular, that of myths. Lewis explored this possible relationship in four ways:

1. The mythic flavor: Lewis admits that in his own experience that Christian theology doesn’t have as strong a mythic appeal because it lacks tragedy, is too spare in its mythos, doesn’t address well the classical imagination of symmetry and harmonic self-evidence nor the romantic imagination of mystery and the inexplicable maze.
2. The aesthetic truth: At the same time, Christian theology does possess the aesthetic rightness that true believers feel for what they know to be actual and real.

3. The mythic archetypes: Lewis sets out a particular interpretation of the canon of scripture, seeing the Old Testament as containing legend and myth that points to the history and prose of the New Testament. He suggests that this is in part because of the kenosis of Christ who humbled himself to be a man in history. He also argues that in second-century (and following) patristic Christianity that the kernel of truth was increasingly kept and the anthropomorphic shell cast aside as questions arose to challenge the faith.
4. The nature of language: This doesn't mean, however, that language can ever lay aside its metaphoric and symbolic structure. He rejects the claim that reason is a randomly evolved mechanism that can nonetheless discover itself.

As an example of the mythic, Lewis describes the Wellsian picture of the world and future history.

- Prelude: The Infinite Void
- Act I: The Beginning of the Infant Life and its heroic struggle
- Act II: The Cave Man and his superstitious fear of his gods
- Act III: The True Man who through science and eugenics conquers nature and spreads into the cosmos
- Act IV: The Twilight of the Gods; divine man is defeated by the running down of the universe

Discussion Questions

1. Is Lewis correct to say that Christian theology doesn't satisfy the classical and romantic imaginations?
2. How do you regard Lewis's view of the Old Testament?
3. Is the Wellsian world picture a powerful myth? Why and/or why not?
4. Is *Out of the Silent Planet* a Christian myth?