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Land Under England**

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For the Record

Deeper Realms:

C.S. Lewis' Re-Visions of Joseph O'Neill's *Land Under England*

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C.S. Lewis wrote two novels in which there is a significant journey underground, concluding with a confrontation with an evil antagonist, *Perelandra* for adults (1943) and *The Silver Chair* for children (1953).¹ In both novels, Lewis makes significant use of Joseph O'Neill's *Land Under England*,² as he draws on contemporary anxieties, ancient literatures, and his own nightmares in ways that allude to and supplement O'Neill's already allusive story. Pertinent to this indebtedness is Lewis' statement that for him the material of a story "invariably begins with mental pictures."³ O'Neill's ability to describe the underground world of his hero's adventures with extremely vivid images is one of the outstanding features of his writing in *Land Under England*, and I believe that the visual impact of this work upon Lewis' imagination considerably enhances and may even have inspired the spiritual dimension in Lewis' novels, a dimension that O'Neill's novel lacks.

Land Under England concerns the adventures of a young engineer named, with resonances of ancient Rome, Anthony Julian. Stumbling upon the entrance to an underground world by Hadrian's [End Page 115] Wall, Anthony descends into this land of family myth that proves to be true. He is on a quest to seek his father, who had found the entrance years before and disappeared. After many adventures, Anthony finds him, but his father has been sadly changed by the totalitarian neo-Roman state there, and Anthony himself is threatened with the same fate. He escapes, only to be pursued by his father, now mentally deranged, who wants to suck Anthony's knowledge of modern munitions out of his mind in order to lead his "Roman" troops to recapture their above-ground land. Anthony makes it back to the surface, but his father is slain by giant spiders. When Lewis discovered this novel soon after its publication, he wrote to his dear friend Arthur Greaves on 23 April 1935, "The most interesting story I have read recently is *Land Under England* by one O'Neill: you should try it."⁴ This "interesting story" belongs to the genre that, as Lewis says in an essay on Orwell, "may be called 'Dystopias' . . . nightmare visions of the future,"⁵ although in this case the dystopia is not a future society like that in Orwell's *1984*, but an alternative society secretly existing under contemporary England. O'Neill's representation of that society is an adversarial response to Plato's *Republic*,⁶ and in order to create his society he brings together themes from the *Republic* (including, obviously, the cave metaphor) and contemporary fascist threats of the 1930s, resulting in an adult fiction that—although not so multiply-voiced as Lewis' novels—is interesting from moral, psychological, and political points of view.

Proof that Lewis remembered this novel many years after reading it comes in his preface to the 1950 edition of his long poem *Dymer* (first published in 1926).⁷ In this preface, written when he was also contemplating *The Silver Chair* (completed March 1951⁸), Lewis says, "Some may be surprised at the strength of the anti-totalitarian feeling in a poem written so long ago. I had not yet read *Brave New World* or *Land Under England* or *The Aerodrome*."⁹ The list form suggests that all three novels, like his own poem *Dymer*—to which he is giving renewed attention—may be read as allegories of totalitarianism. Not long afterwards (in his 1955 Orwell essay), he refers to the Spanish Civil War in remarking that "all totalitarian rulers, however their shirts may be coloured, are equally the enemies of Man."¹⁰ While these contemporary conflicts are reflected to some degree in Lewis' two novels, both *Perelandra* and *The Silver Chair* place so much emphasis upon the individual struggle against an...

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Land Under England concerns the adventures of a young engineer named, with resonances of ancient Rome, Anthony Julian. Stumbling upon the entrance to an underground world by Hadri-

1 *Perelandra* (Collier Books, 1965; first British copyright 1943); *The Silver Chair* (Collier Books, 1970; first published by Macmillan, 1953).

2 *Land Under England* (Gollancz, 1935) was one of four novels by Joseph O'Neill, an Irishman born in the Aran Isles in 1886. He was elected to the Irish Academy of Letters in 1936, shortly after publication of *Land Under England*, and he died in 1953. *Land Under England* was republished in 1981 by the Overlook Press with a few changes in the text and different page numbers.

3 "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say What's To Be Said," *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (Harcourt, 1982), p. 45. Lewis repeats this statement frequently: "For me all fiction begins with pictures in my head" (*Letters to Children*, ed. Lyle W. Dorsett and Marjorie Lamp-Moad [Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 1985], p. 95); "All my seven Narnian books, and my three science fiction books, began with seeing pictures in my head" (*Radio Times*, 15 July 1960, quoted by Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* [Collins, 1974], p. 169). Lewis elaborates the idea in his essay "It All Began with a Picture" (*On Stories*, pp. 53–54). As Green and Hooper remark, "It is unfortunate that Lewis recorded so few of the 'pictures' out of which the Narnian stories grew: 'a form carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion' almost make up the sum total" (*Biography*, p. 250). They have the propensity to propose that some of Lewis' "pictures" could have come from dreams. My suggestion is that they could also come from vivid verbal descriptions that Lewis had read, which would then work on his imagination like dreams.

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