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*The* MEDIEVAL MIND  
of C. S. LEWIS

HOW GREAT BOOKS  
SHAPED A GREAT MIND



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## CHAPTER ONE

# *The* LOST CATHEDRAL

### *The Medieval Cosmos*

*Characteristically, medieval man . . . was an organizer, a codifier, a man of system. His ideal could not be unfairly summed up . . . “a place for everything, and everything in its (right) place.” Three things are typical of him. First, that small minority of his cathedrals in which the design of the architect was actually achieved. . . . I am thinking of a thing like Salisbury. Secondly, the Summa of Thomas Aquinas. And thirdly, the Divine Comedy of Dante. In all these alike we see the tranquil, indefatigable, exultant energy of a passionately logical mind ordering a huge mass of heterogenous details into unity. They desire unity and proportion, all the classical virtues, just as keenly as the Greeks did. But they have a greater and more varied collection of things to fit in.*

C. S. LEWIS, “IMAGINATION AND THOUGHT IN THE MIDDLE AGES,”  
*STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE LITERATURE*

IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION, as Lewis joked more than once, the term “Middle Ages” evokes a misty blend of knights, castles, witch trials, torture devices, armor, superstitious peasants (covered in dirt), and maybe a dragon and princess thrown in to boot. Need it

be said? That was not how Lewis envisioned the time period. Rather, as he pointed out in all of his academic writing, the medieval period was not an age of primitive superstition, but one of bookish sophistication (see epigraph), and anyone who has wandered around a great, Old World cathedral, like Salisbury Cathedral, has some idea of what Lewis's comparison means: it is a paradoxical juxtaposition of astonishing variety, meticulous order, and a saturation of light. On the one hand, both modern and medieval visitors are dazed by the height of the vault, the forest of ordered columns, the infinite variety of decorative motifs and side chapels and stones, while being impressed, at the same time, by the radiation of color, as if light were dwelling in living stones. In a phrase, this is what Lewis meant by "finely ordered multiplicity."<sup>1</sup> But in addition to these structures of literary, logical, and architectural order—the *Comedy*, *Summa*, and Salisbury Cathedral—Lewis wanted to include one more work of art as "typical" of the medieval achievement: the "medieval synthesis itself, the whole organisation of their theology, science, and history into a single, complex, harmonious mental Model of the Universe."<sup>2</sup> In other words, what Lewis admired most was not simply this or that medieval belief or doctrine, but rather the whole way of viewing the world, the whole ensemble, the whole intellectual "atmosphere" of what I have called the Long Middle Ages, and it was *that* which he, as the modern Boethius, felt it was vital to preserve, explain, and make intelligible, even within modernity. In short, Lewis perceived that for the medieval period, the natural world, like so many stained-glass windows, was, as it were, transparent to a light from beyond this world. What are for us merely natural processes seemed to our ancestors phenomena that pointed beyond themselves. The whole world felt like a cosmic cathedral.

This chapter will build on the previous one by explaining what it was exactly that Lewis saw and felt in the medieval period that

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<sup>1</sup>*DI*, 11-12. For more on this, consult Bissera Pentcheva's excellent "Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetic," *Gesta* 50, no. 2 (2011): 93-115.

<sup>2</sup>*DI*, 11.

justified the intensity of his lifelong devotion to the study and “translation” of ideas and texts from the medieval period into the modern vernacular. And what we’ll see is that this ensemble of beliefs that made up the medieval “model”—Lewis’s term for the cosmic imaginary of the medieval period—was not only a kind of work of art, but, more importantly, an *image*, a powerful thought experiment, a kind of icon.

It was this medieval view of the universe that became the root metaphor for his “doctrine” of transposition. In one of his greatest sermons, Lewis develops a musical metaphor, “transposition,” to refer to those various moments when a higher, more complicated system is expressed in a lower, less complicated one—for example, when a Mahler symphony, with its gargantuan orchestration for four hundred instruments, is transposed for a piano, or when a language with a huge vocabulary is translated into one with a limited one (like Latin into Anglo-Saxon). This happens, too, in our emotional lives. In the sermon, Lewis reflects on a passage from Samuel Pepys’s diary, in which the seventeenth-century author, in an effort to describe the delight and rapture he experienced at a concert, compared that aesthetic experience to the jittery nerves he had suffered when he first fell in love with his wife, as well as to the jittery nerves he experienced when seasick! The bodily experience of falling in love, the fluttering of the diaphragm that we experience when in love, the rapturous shortness of breath we experience when we listen to Elgar’s Cello Concerto, or the queasy fluttering of the diaphragm we suffer when we are sick at sea are all, on the mere physiological level, impossible to distinguish.<sup>3</sup> But if we believe that the emotional life is higher, more varied, and more subtle than the life of bodily needs and sensations, it follows that we encounter the bodily language’s “limited vocabulary” when the life of the mind and heart overflow into our physical sensations.<sup>4</sup> Lewis develops this thought experiment of transposition in order to

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<sup>3</sup>C. S. Lewis, “Transposition,” in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 1980), 95-97.

<sup>4</sup>Lewis, “Transposition,” 99.

construct an explanatory model for how higher spiritual realities are related to lower sensible realities. As my emotions are to my physical sensations, so too is the “higher world” to the natural world of time and nature: it fills this world and makes it seem “too full,” “too dense” to *not* point beyond itself.

This, then, is what is at stake when considering Lewis’s admiration for medieval cosmology, because for him the medieval universe was not just a system of exploded scientific beliefs, but the natural, icon of transposition, the greatest example of the spiritual world expressing itself in the limited vocabulary of the physical, natural world. And what nuclear reactors, particle accelerators, and the Hubble telescope are for us, the medieval cathedral—and the cosmological “model” it represented—was for the medieval period: a kind of “experiment” that made visible an elusive and deeper truth. It is this iconic vision of the medieval cosmos that Lewis tried to get his students and audiences to see, and feel, and breathe. Thus the Oxford professor’s interest in medieval cosmology was not merely an arcane, archaeological antiquarianism. Why? Because being able to see the world with medieval eyes could provide even modern people with a “model” for thinking about the relationship between the natural and spiritual world.

I’ll now try to provide a sketch of what that medieval vision was by drawing from Lewis’s favorite medieval authorities.

### A SNAPSHOT OF THE MEDIEVAL COSMOS

Today, if we read the ancient statesman and author Cicero at all, it is because we think of him as a great exemplar of ancient republican politics, as the orator who defended the republic from tyranny by means of the elegant word. In the Middle Ages, though, Cicero’s fame was due to a short, visionary treatise, the “Dream of Scipio,” a ten-page account of a Roman general’s prophetic dream that served as the concluding chapter to his own attempt to respond to Plato in his own Latin-speaking *Republic*. In the medieval period, the pages that make up this visionary dream tale were copied out independently from the rest of the text, in part because a writer, several centuries later in late



antiquity, Macrobius—whose writing is analyzed by Lewis in *Discarded Image*<sup>5</sup>—had made it famous by devoting a three hundred-page commentary to it. Macrobius, a Latin-writing Platonist, was working sometime in the early 400s AD, and he was convinced that every word in Cicero’s visionary account had a deep, mystical significance. This belief conditioned the next thousand years to read Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio” in hushed, reverent tones, as if, within these pages, the deep mysteries of the universe were revealed to those with eyes to see. Lewis knew these texts intimately.

In Cicero’s imaginative account Scipio floats up through the spheres of the heavens and comes to stand at the apex of the universe in order to take in a “view from above.” Once there, Scipio (like Dante over a millennium later) is warmly greeted by his male ancestors, who give him lessons in the Roman virtues of honor, justice, and duty. They also make him turn around to contemplate the universe stretched out beneath his feet. At one particularly dramatic moment, Scipio looks down and sees the cosmos moving beneath his feet, and then, hearing an incredible music, he asks, “What is this sound, so loud and yet so sweet, that fills my ears?” His guide answers,

That is the sound produced by the impetus and momentum of the spheres themselves. It is made up of intervals which, though unequal, are determined systematically by fixed proportions. The blend of high and low notes produces an even flow of various harmonies. . . . By imitating this system with strings and voices experts have succeeded in opening a way back to this place. . . . Filled with this sound, people’s ears have become deaf to it.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the planets are spaced out proportionally to one another, so that the distances between Earth and Mars, and Venus and Jupiter, correspond to harmonic intervals of chords. As the planets rotate, they create a kind of intellectual music, to which we earthlings have become deaf, but

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<sup>5</sup>*DI*, 60-69.

<sup>6</sup>Cicero, *The Republic and the Laws*, trans. Niall Rudd, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90.

we can regain the ability to hear this music through study or through beautiful music, which imitates the same harmonic proportions.

This idea of a musical universe—whose planets are spaced out like strings on a musical instrument—delighted the imaginations of medieval thinkers. Boethius, to take one example, borrowed this idea from Cicero. In a particularly beautiful poem in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius, too, imagines himself high above our universe, viewing the cosmos stretched out beneath his feet. You can hear the author's excitement and delight as he describes the choreographed movements of the universe:

Starmaker, master of spheres,  
 At whose command the heavens spin  
 In the constellations' dance that you  
 On your steady throne have choreographed,  
 Bright stars grow dim as you bring on the moon,  
 Crescent or gibbous, reflecting her brother's  
 Dazzling fire. . . .  
 When leaves fall and the cold of winter  
 Blows from the north, our days diminish,  
 But then, in summer's burgeoning heat  
 The dark hours of nighttime dwindle. . . .  
 Not even the blowing winds are random,  
 But Boreas strips leaves from the trees  
 And Zephyrus brings on gentling nurture.<sup>7</sup>

“Not even the blowing winds are random,” says Boethius rhapsodically. In other words, Boethius closed his eyes, looked at the earth in his mind's eye, watched its seasons springing up and falling away, and perceived the heavens rotating, all in ordered rhythms. This is what

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<sup>7</sup>Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* 1.5 (18-19). For Boethius's Latin, I use *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. Claudio Moreschini (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005). For Boethius's poetry, I like *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. David Slavitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), on account of its lyrical quality. (The translation quoted here is Slavitt's.) But for the prose I prefer the literalism of the old Loeb volume: *Theological Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library 74 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).



Boethius, in his lesser-known work *De musica*, called “the music of the cosmos.” For Boethius, as for Cicero, there is a rational order that keeps the world in balance, keeping it from spinning out of control. It ensures that elements of different kinds bond properly to one another; it regulates how the seasons cycle in an ongoing carousel; this order also regulates how the stars and planets turn. He calls this cosmic order “music” because it is a deep, mathematical harmony that frames out the world in understandable patterns. What is more, Boethius (again like Cicero) taught that through instrumental music we can regain a “taste” of the musicality of the world, and thus retune our souls to cosmic music. Music is philosophical therapy, bringing the soul back into tune with the great Conductor’s universe. This is why the *Consolation of Philosophy* alternates between prose and verse.<sup>8</sup>

In a 1956 lecture to the Zoological Laboratory in Cambridge, we find Lewis not only giving a précis of his *Discarded Image* but also trying to “perform” the sound of this symphonic cosmos. In the lecture, he asks his audience of modern scientists to conduct a thought experiment: “Go out on any starry night and walk alone for half an hour, resolutely assuming that the pre-Copernican astronomy is true. Look up at the sky with the assumption in your mind.”<sup>9</sup> And if you do so, you will be able to catch a glimpse of how the old universe at once “abashes and exalts the mind,”<sup>10</sup> in contrast to the modern conception of the world, which imposes on the mind a sense of being lost in infinite and vast space. He explains that if we look up into the sky with medieval expectations in mind, then we will feel it both as finite (“hard, clear, sudden as a national frontier”<sup>11</sup>) but also as pushing down on us (“because the Earth is an absolute center, and Earthwards from any part of this immense universe is downwards, you will find that you are

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<sup>8</sup>David Chamberlain, “Philosophy of Music in the *Consolatio* of Boethius,” *Speculum* 45, no. 1 (1970): 80-97; Stephen Blackwood, *The Consolation of Boethius as Poetic Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup>Lewis, “Imagination and Thought,” in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Canto Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47.

<sup>10</sup>Lewis, “Imagination and Thought,” 48.

<sup>11</sup>Lewis, “Imagination and Thought,” 48.

looking at the planets and stars in terms not merely of ‘distance’ but of the very special kind of distance which we call ‘height’<sup>12</sup>):

These two factors taken together—enormous but finite size, and distance which, however vast, remain unambiguously vertical, and indeed vertiginous—at once present you with something which differs from the Newtonian picture rather as a great building differs from a great jungle. You can lose yourself in infinity; there is indeed nothing much else you can do with it. It arouses questions, it prompts to a certain kind of wonder and reverie, usually a somber kind. . . . But it answers no questions.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to Macrobius, Lewis also believed that another author was foundational for the medieval model: Calcidius, who wrote, at some point in late antiquity, a massively tedious but extremely successful commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*, the only work of Plato to be read throughout the medieval period. Calcidius crawls passage by passage through Plato’s text, dividing the text up into blocks and taking the occasion to provide what he thought would be the necessary background for each subject.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Calcidius, who never says no to a digression, provides a manualistic introduction to any field of medieval science you could hope to know about. He was so digressive that, four hundred pages after he started, he had only made it halfway through the Platonic text he wished to comment on.

But what is a bizarre and tiresome book for us was a treasure for medieval students and scholars. On more than one occasion we find Calcidius a little breathless before his vision. When he looked up at the heavens, he saw “a perfect, unchanging symphony” because the stars “are borne round in a unified and constant movement, adhering to the [the largest sphere which embraces all things] as it leads them round, always maintaining one and the same position and preserving their order in an unvarying pattern, never admitting any change in position,

<sup>12</sup>Lewis, “Imagination and Thought,” 48.

<sup>13</sup>Lewis, “Imagination and Thought,” 48.

<sup>14</sup>Calcidius, *On Plato’s Timaeus*, ed. John Magee, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

ascent, size, or even color.”<sup>15</sup> But when he lets his ecstatic eyes drift back down to everything below the moon, like some medieval anticipation of Cormac McCarthy, he is disgusted. This is the realm of “birth and death” and “increase and diminution, every kind of transformation, and transposition from place to place” where “murder, violence, madness” dwell.<sup>16</sup> Lewis poignantly described this medieval attitude by likening the state of human beings to those who watch the celestial spectacle from afar, from the outskirts. Watching *its* beauty, we are overwhelmed, and desire to imitate it to the extent we can. We are, in a word, “anthropoperipheral”: “We are creatures of the Margin.”<sup>17</sup>

Over his lengthy commentary, Calcidius builds up a picture of the world in his reader’s mind: the movement of stars and planets, the interaction of elements, the whole moving picture of the world. But the genius of the vision is found in how all of these movements participate in the same underlying pattern, the deep music or mathematical harmony that rules the world. For Calcidius, “mathematics” is more real than the visible, because it is the rational design of which everything else is merely a physical expression. By perceiving this deep level of numbers, we can discover the mathematical skeleton beneath the world’s skin, and so can get at the “real” world, the deep world. We’re now beginning to see why the metaphor of cathedral is pertinent to medieval cosmology. For Calcidius, and the rest of the tradition, if you cultivate a perception of the deep harmony of nature, it leads to worship, because the “soul, fashioned after the same pattern as the celestial bodies, immediately recognizes its own natural affinity to them.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, despite the messiness of earthly reality, we find underneath the material a paradigm of order, and thus we can see that, in an extraordinary phrase, “time is an *image* of eternity.”<sup>19</sup> Even more significantly, these harmonic patterns are likened to the longing and groans of a world that is earnestly engaged in making itself as like the eternal

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<sup>15</sup>Calcidius, *On Plato’s Timaeus*, 231.

<sup>16</sup>Calcidius, *On Plato’s Timaeus*, 243.

<sup>17</sup>*DI*, 58.

<sup>18</sup>Calcidius, *On Plato’s Timaeus*, 211.

<sup>19</sup>Calcidius, *On Plato’s Timaeus*, 157; repeated in Boethius.

simplicity of the divine as it can. Eternity is the world's "paradigm" (its exemplar, goal, and end), and that end is invisible and full of joy, the realm of "pure intelligible light." For this reason, the visible world, in Plato's phrase, is a great "icon": it is an artistic representation that translates into a new medium the eternal principles of a higher order. The very physical movements of the world constitute a kind of longing to measure up. Physics is prayer in an iconic universe.<sup>20</sup> Thus the universe is a kind of text, which inspires contemplation of the deep patterns built in by the craftsman.<sup>21</sup> All of these orchestrated motions exist because they constitute the best possible way to make manifest the perfection of eternity.<sup>22</sup> And when we grasp this point, we have come to the heart of the "iconic" nature of the model Lewis so admired. It is a difficult concept—time's imitation of eternity—but Lewis thought it was fundamental to the understanding of the medieval world.

For instance, in *Discarded Image*, Lewis provides a brilliant synthesis of some of the most severely dialectical arguments that make up *Consolation V*, the final chapter of Boethius's magnum opus, that part specifically concerned with the relationship between perpetuity and eternity. Although most of us think of "eternity" as that which goes "on and on," Boethius explains, we should actually call *that*, "perpetuity." Perpetuity is nothing more than an endless chain of brief moments, connected together. And given that eternity, on the other hand, is the "actual and timeless fruition of illimitable life," Boethius can call time an imitation of eternity. Time, as it were, is almost a "parody" of eternity, a "hopeless attempt to compensate for the transitoriness of its 'presents' by infinitely multiplying them."<sup>23</sup> God, of course, is not perpetual, but eternal. And so, what, in time, is spread out over an infinite number of moments, can be found gathered into a full and simultaneous perfection in God.

In other words, the world of time itself is a veil, behind which stands eternity, and Lewis was not reticent about his admiration of

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<sup>20</sup>See Plato, *Timaeus* 27c.

<sup>21</sup>Calcidius, *On Plato's Timaeus*, 318.

<sup>22</sup>Calcidius, *On Plato's Timaeus*, 243.

<sup>23</sup>*DI*, 89.

this passage in Boethius. In fact, Lewis thought that Boethius had done a better job than Plato himself in explaining how the invisible and visible worlds are connected!<sup>24</sup>

But this was not the first time Lewis attempted to expound the ancient idea of time imitating eternity. Decades earlier, in a long but important passage from his 1936 *Allegory of Love*, he used the synonymous terms *symbolism* and *sacramentalism* to get at this Platonic tradition transmitted to the medieval period by Calcidius and Macrobius. Appreciating the world's symbolism must begin, the scholar notes, with observing the crucial difference between “sacramentalism” and mere “allegory”:

If our passions, being immaterial, can be copied by material inventions [through allegory], then it is possible that our material world in its turn is the copy of an invisible world. As the god Amor and his figurative garden are to the actual passions of men, so perhaps we ourselves and our “real” world are to something else. The attempt to read that something else through its sensible imitations, to see the archetype in the copy, is what I mean by symbolism or sacramentalism. . . . To put the difference in another way, for the symbolist it is we who are the allegory. . . . The world which we mistake for reality is the flat outline of that which elsewhere veritably is in all the round of its unimaginable dimensions. . . .

Symbolism comes to us from Greece. It makes its first effective appearance in European thought with the dialogues of Plato. The Sun is the copy of the Good. Time is a moving image of eternity. All visible things exist just in so far as they succeed in imitating the Forms. . . . [This is the] diffused Platonism, or Neoplatonism—if there is a difference—of Augustine, the pseudo-Dionysius, of Macrobius, of the divine popularizer Boethius.<sup>25</sup>

The whole world, then, can be read as a “symbol”—that is, a “copy,” as in a mirror that distorts an image or a portrait that merely sums up a

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<sup>24</sup>*DI*, 89-90.

<sup>25</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 45-46.

likeness. When dealing with our earthly “images” or “copies” or “depictions,” we know that the real thing is better: because it is alive, in motion, has color and depth. And so, we must apply this to the cosmos. It is copy. In a strange way, even the fundamental properties of physics (motion and space and time) are mere images, pointing to some more fundamental reality. This is what Chris Armstrong has called Lewis’s “world-sacramentalism.”<sup>26</sup>

### **SYMPHONY OF THE WORLD**

But as I have already suggested, the major contention of this book is that we always have to keep in mind the “third Lewis,” that is, the vernacularizer or popularizer who translated these abstract formulations of time’s imitation of eternity into devotional and imaginative writings. And so, I would like to conclude this chapter with two quick examples to show how the new, British Boethius used his fiction to re-create (in a modern vernacular) what it felt like to “breathe” this medieval air.

In the creation scene found in *The Magician’s Nephew*, Diggory and Jill, along with Uncle Andrew, the White Witch, and the cabby, are cast into Narnia before the world had been made. Standing there in the pre-cosmic dark, when Narnia was yet formless and void, the ragtag group is able to watch as creation is sung into existence. At first, Diggory hears low notes “deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself.”<sup>27</sup> It is “the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it. The horse seemed to like it too; he gave a sort of whinny a horse would give if, after years of being a cab-horse, it found itself back in the old field where it had played as a foal.”<sup>28</sup> But then something more wondrous takes place: that single melodic line becomes a rich tapestry of multiple melodies. It becomes a kind of medieval polyphony. The initial line is joined by “more voices than you could possibly count. They were in harmony with it, but far higher up the scale: cold, tingling,

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<sup>26</sup>See his discussion of how medieval “sacramentality” can serve as a rejoinder to modern materialism in *Medieval Wisdom*, 147-64.

<sup>27</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1984), 116.

<sup>28</sup>Lewis, *Magician’s Nephew*, 116.



silvery voices.”<sup>29</sup> These are the voices of the stars joining the symphony. Soon, “the Voice on the earth was now louder and more triumphant,”<sup>30</sup> as it sung the sun into being: “The eastern sky changed from white to pink and from pink to gold. The Voice rose and rose, till all the air was shaking with it. And just as it swelled to the mightiest and most glorious sound it had yet produced, the sun arose,”<sup>31</sup> and “you could imagine that it laughed for joy as it came up.”<sup>32</sup> The song changes one more time: “The Lion was pacing to and fro about that empty land and singing his new song. It was softer and more lilting than the song by which he had called up the stars and the sun; a gentle, rippling music. And as he walked and sang the valley grew green with grass.”<sup>33</sup> Polly notices that “when you listened to his song you heard the things he was making up: when you looked round you, you saw them. This was so exciting that she had no time to be afraid.”<sup>34</sup> In this Mahler-like symphonic moment (I’m thinking especially of *Symphony* no. 1), Aslan has not only sung the earth, the stars, the sun, the flowers, and the animals into existence, but also let his song infuse his creatures, so that his song has become their song. The stars, the sun, the plants, the animals have their own personalities, but as lent to them by Aslan. The world is penetrated by song, and joy. It is a polyphonic world of beauty that leaves you “with open mouths and shining eyes.”<sup>35</sup>

In a second passage, his brilliantly terrifying séance in “The Descent of the Gods,” in *That Hideous Strength*, Ransom and Merlin are visited by the ancient planetary intelligences—that is, the pure, spiritual intellects of classical mythology descend, drawing all the affairs of the household into their spiritual fields. When the winged Mercury comes to visit, the household erupts in uproarious talk, outrageous banter, puns and jokes and arguments of ridiculous complexity: “Paradoxes, fancies,

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<sup>29</sup>Lewis, *Magician’s Nephew*, 116-17.

<sup>30</sup>Lewis, *Magician’s Nephew*, 117.

<sup>31</sup>Lewis, *Magician’s Nephew*, 119.

<sup>32</sup>Lewis, *Magician’s Nephew*, 119.

<sup>33</sup>Lewis, *Magician’s Nephew*, 123.

<sup>34</sup>Lewis, *Magician’s Nephew*, 126-27.

<sup>35</sup>Lewis, *Magician’s Nephew*, 118.

anecdotes, theories laughingly advanced yet (on consideration) well worth taking seriously, had flowed from them and over them with dazzling prodigality.”<sup>36</sup> Next Venus comes, bringing with her sickeningly sweet tranquility and fragrances of “nard and cassia’s balmy smells and all Arabia breathing from a box; even something more subtly sweet, perhaps maddening,”<sup>37</sup> while, upstairs, in Merlin “the inconsolable wound with which man is born waked and ached at this touching.”<sup>38</sup> Mars comes, breathing into all a joyful, masculine, militant sense of confidence and camaraderie: “Their love for one another became intense. Each, looking on all the rest, thought: ‘I’m lucky to be here. I could die with these.’”<sup>39</sup> Saturn brings feelings of infinite depth, and visions of height and profundity, and thoughts, tinged with cold melancholy, of eternity, of time, and profound depths,<sup>40</sup> before Jupiter arrives to cast a spell of big booming bells, ceremony, pomp, and festivity. Throughout this section, Lewis alternates his descriptions of the encounters with these “Oyarses” on the sensuous level of the flesh and emotions, as experienced in the kitchen below, with the higher perception into the eternal and spiritual realities, enjoyed by Ransom and Merlin in the room above.

But the important thing to note in these two passages, is that Lewis, “one of the finest Christian Platonists,” as Louis Markos calls him,<sup>41</sup> set himself to re-create the medieval *harmonia mundi* of Macrobius, Boethius, and Calcidius, who had taught that the whole world is tuned “as with the seven tones of a plucked cithara.”<sup>42</sup> For Calcidius (as well as for Cicero and Boethius) the heavens are quite literally a symphony: “The Pythagorean doctrine is that the world consists of harmonic ratio and that the celestial bodies, separated by intervals which are congruent and consonant with one another, produce musical sounds owing to the extremely rapid impulse of their flight. . . . Musical sounds are produced by stellar

<sup>36</sup>C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (London: Scribner, 2003), 318.

<sup>37</sup>Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 319.

<sup>38</sup>Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 320.

<sup>39</sup>Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 321.

<sup>40</sup>Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 323.

<sup>41</sup>Markos, *From Plato to Christ: How Platonic Thought Shaped the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 202.

<sup>42</sup>Calcidius, *On Plato’s Timaeus*, 239.

movement.”<sup>43</sup> Lewis, having lectured on the passage for his students, was able to turn it into an imaginative world suitable for us moderns.

### THE LOST CATHEDRAL

The long, Platonic tradition, then, taught Lewis two things: to see the world as a symphony but always to take this symphony (or cathedral) as a symbol or sacrament or transposition, which gestures at something beyond. The world itself is but a sketchy translation of a poem that no one has ever heard. And it is for this reason that Lewis’s mind kept drifting back to cathedrals when he wanted to describe how the medieval cosmos “felt,” because, like the medieval model, the cathedral rendered a dreamlike effect, in which viewers (both now and in the medieval period) are amazed by the myriad details; struck by how, at the same time, all of these details are framed out in a larger ordered and harmonious whole; and dazzled by how the surfaces seemed saturated in light. One medieval viewer (Jean de Jandun), an otherwise unknown professor at the University of Paris, wrote a short piece of “travel-writing” in 1323 (*Tractatus de laudibus Parisius*). In his short and overwrought rhetorical composition in praise of Paris and its buildings, Jean, arguably the original French narcissist, nevertheless gives us precious insight into what a medieval church “felt” like in contemporary eyes. He describes Notre Dame of Paris as “terrible” (by which he means awe-filled) and “multipartite” and “wondrous,” and refers both to its splendor and its overlapping, interwoven patterns. He’s “not so much overwhelmed by the fact that Notre-Dame is beautiful but that it is beautiful in so many ways. Some things are high, some low, some round, some square, smooth, ornate, intricate, colorful, gemlike, light-filled.”<sup>44</sup>

But Jean also describes the cathedral as possessing “saturated” surfaces. For him, it is full to the point of excess. In another medieval writer, cited often by Lewis, Abbot Suger, who oversaw and wrote about the rebuilding of the first Gothic cathedral, we have a passage

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<sup>43</sup>Calcidius, *On Plato’s Timaeus*, 239.

<sup>44</sup>Jason M. Baxter, “What We Lost at Notre-Dame de Paris,” *America*, April 13, 2020, [www.americamagazine.org/sites/default/files/issue\\_pdf/ARI\\_04.13.20.pdf](http://www.americamagazine.org/sites/default/files/issue_pdf/ARI_04.13.20.pdf).

of similarly effusive praise. With delight, Abbot Suger comments on the “diversity of materials [such as] gold, gems, pearls,” and on the mingling of “these different ornaments both new and old,” and how his church has every precious stone mentioned in the book of Jeremiah (sardius, topaz, jasper, chrysolite, onyx, beryl, sapphire, emerald) except the carbuncle. In sum, this “multicolor” church “abound[s] most copiously” with colors. We might be struck by how “gaudy” and overdecorated this sounds, but Suger (and his contemporaries) loved how the senses were overloaded with an “excess” of meaning. When Suger entered into his cathedral, then, he felt like he was dwelling, as it were, “in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner.”<sup>45</sup> Standing in a medieval cathedral gives you a kind of x-ray vision of the world. Meaning is everywhere, full and rich. The material world has been gathered to a saturation point. In a cathedral, then, the spiritual world feels like it is leaking in, and our response is to want to soar up and through and out. Simply look up any of the black-and-white photographs of Salisbury Cathedral, and you’ll see what I mean.<sup>46</sup>

In short, such medieval and modern experiences of the cathedral help us reconstruct the sense of awe and fullness and saturation that Lewis himself felt when contemplating the medieval model. The very world in its ordinary operation in time and space presented an experience of “anagogy,” an uplift of the heart, a sense of deep insight that comes to the threshold of worship. The world is too full, suffused by bright colors that cut and burn. Such medieval symbolism or (better) sacramentalism, as formulated in the Platonic tradition, is the key concept to hold in mind to appreciate what it felt like to “breathe” the atmosphere of the premodern world.

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<sup>45</sup> *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and Its Art Treasure*, ed. and trans. Erwin Panofsky, 2nd ed. by Gerda Panofsky-Soergel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 21.

<sup>46</sup> I’m thinking of the ones by the Edwardian architectural photography firm Bedford Lemere in particular.

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