

Urth: Terminus Est

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 26 Nov 1998

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Nigel Price — 26 Nov 1998, 06:56

Half wishing now that I'd opted for the subscription option whereby I would get each message as it came out, rather than waiting for each evening's digest of the day's correspondence, I find myself too impatient to wait to find out whether the author of the "Lexicon Urthus" really is a regular contributor to the list, and plunge ahead to ask one of the many questions about that splendid work that has been bothering me ever since I bought it.

It concern's Severian's sword, Terminus Est. The "Lexicon Urthus" article begins as follows:

Terminus Est - the carnificial sword that Master Palaemon gives to Severian. Its name is translated by Severian as "This Is the Line of Division," but it could also be read "This Is the End" (either a message to the condemned or a name denoting the final work of the weaponsmith), or perhaps most intriguingly, "This Is Terminus, God of Boundaries."

The article then continues with an interesting discussion of swords made from meteoric iron and points of similarity between Severian's sword and King Arthur's Excalibur.

But surely the obvious point about Severian's sword is that it is named in a direct quotation of Christ's words from the cross, "It is finished!", which I'm pretty sure is translated in the Vulgate (Wolfe, I believe, is a Catholic) as "Terminus Est." (I couldn't find my Latin Vulgate when I was looking just now, but if anyone has one to hand, perhaps they could check for me.)

Anyway, that would seem to be the most obvious if not the only possible translation of "Terminus Est" - "It is finished."

Now, I'd always taken this to be part of Wolfe's oblique presentation of Severian as a Messianic figure. This element of his persona seems to become most explicit in the account of his encounter with Typhon, where the narrative suddenly, and to me, at any rate, surprisingly, falls into the pattern of Christ's temptation by the Devil in the wilderness.

(As an aside, I should say that this moving in and out of an overtly symbolic or allegorical mode is one of Wolfe's most characteristic and intriguing literary techniques. One moment, all is naturalistic, the next moment you're in the middle of a parable. The transition each way is usually so deft that it takes me completely by surprise, and often takes my breath away. For instance: is "Free Live Free" an allegory of grace? It seems to be at some points - in the opening and closing sections, for instance - but elsewhere it drifts into a rambling if amusingly Runyanesque account of urban low life. Then again, bang in the middle of the story, just when you think you've worked out what sort of narrative mode you're in, Wolfe introduces the story of the power failure in the mental hospital, and suddenly you're in a quasi-Platonic parable, like a modern day version of the Parable of the Cave in "The Republic". How do you tell which are the

patients and which are the doctors when all the lights go out? But I digress...)

It may seem strange to give Christ's words on the cross as the name of a sword, but there is in fact plenty of sword imagery associated with Christ in the New Testament. Matthew 10:34 has Jesus announcing...

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."

I once read an interview with Wolfe where he said that he used "Pilgrim's Progress" as one of the literary models for TBotNS, (Severian travelling from the Guild of Torturers to the Autarch's palace just as Bunyan's Christian escaped the City of Destruction and travelled to the Celestial City?), so Christ's instructions to his disciples in Luke 22:36 may be apposite:

He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one."

Severian, after all, does set out on his "pilgrimage" equipped with both a sword and a cloak (albeit an extremely black one!).

Since, as you've probably realized, I'm just pasting these references across from the concordance on my hard disk, you might also like to consider Terminus Est in the light of Romans 13:4, where Paul's description of the authority of a civil ruler does bear a certain resemblance to Severian's judicial role:

For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Then again, you've got Ephesians 6:17, in the famous "Whole Armour of God" passage, where the believer is encouraged to take "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Hebrews 4:12 is interesting too, because again the sword is interpreted as having a judicial role:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Nothing about mercury in the blade, but never mind...

Revelation symbolises Christ's words as a two-edged sword coming from his mouth (cf Rev 1.16, 2.12, 2.16, 19.15 and 19.21), and interestingly for us (well, I don't know, moderately interestingly for us, I suppose...) in view of Severian's ultimate role as bringer of the New Sun, describes Christ's face as shining like the sun (eg Rev 1.16).

So... "Terminus Est" as an adjunct of Severian the pilgrim, as both tool and symbol of his role as judicial authority, and as an attribute that confirms his Christ-like significance.

What do people think?

Nigel Price

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Kevin J. Maroney — 29 Nov 1998, 11:52 · follows Nigel Price

At 06:56 AM 11/26/98 -0500, Nigel wrote:

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John 19:30 cum ergo accepisset Iesus acetum dixit consummatum est et

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inclinato capite tradidit spiritum

("And when Jesus had received the vinegar, he said "It is finished" and bowed his head and gave up his spirit.")

It's always a danger to assume that words in other languages have the same connotations and nuances that they do in English, of course.

Otherwise, excellent rumination on grace, Christian imagery, etc.

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Review of Science Fiction <http://ebbs.english.vt.edu/olp/nyrsf/nyrsf.html>

Michael Straight — 29 Nov 1998, 23:08 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

On Sun, 29 Nov 1998, Kevin J. Maroney wrote:

At 06:56 AM 11/26/98 -0500, Nigel wrote:

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Alas! A very beautiful hypothesis slain by an ugly fact. Nigel really had me feeling like I'd missed the blindingly obvious for a minute there.

Even so, the comparison is interesting. I've heard more than one sermon on the importance of understanding the last words of Jesus to mean "It is consummated" rather than "It is the end."

Severian's sword is shattered, after all. He must cease being one who says "It is the end" to the condemned in order that he may one day say, "It is consummated" to the whole world.

-Rostrum