

Reverse Typology and the Inverse Alchemy of Time

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 29 Apr 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1594>

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Nigel Price — 29 Apr 1999, 11:16

This was drafted as a personal e-mail response to Jonathan Laidlow's recent contribution to the list on Wolfe's Modernism. He suggested I post it on the list, so here it is...

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Despite a lot of catch-up reading recently, I've still got six Urth lists sitting in my electronic in-tray, waiting to be read, so I'm afraid that I can hardly be considered up to date on the current debates. Sounds as though things have taken another interesting turn, though.

As for your posting... My initial reaction is (naturally!) that you're both very right, and very wrong. Right in pointing out the way that myths mutate and combine and recombine in the world of Urth so that it is difficult or even impossible to map any one character or incident to any identifiable religious person, symbol or symbolic narrative with absolute confidence. Wrong in that I think it is absolutely crucial to Wolfe's moral and literary intentions that Severian's world should be absolutely real, and one where real ethical choices are made, with genuine consequences for both good and ill. To put this into generic terms: it is vital that the work appears to be fantasy, whilst following a wholly science-fictional rationale.

As for Urth's continuity with Earth, I think that the presence of the photograph of the astronaut on the moon in Ultan's library should give us a fairly hefty hint that Urth is indeed our own Earth, infinitely changed and degenerated.

I'm still trying to hammer out my own "unified field theory" for understanding Wolfe's beliefs and intentions, but one idea that you might like to consider is that Urth of the Commonwealth exhibits a sort of counter-typology, looking back to the truths of the past, rather than forward, as in classical typology, to truths of the future. Thus, just as many of the New Testament authors and their exegetical successors regarded stories in the Old Testament as prefiguring in some distorted way the truths to be revealed in the new covenant (cf eg John 3.14-15, Romans 5.12-19), so the stories and episodes recounted in Severian's world point back in some refracted way to myths and truths all but forgotten in the ancient world of Urth.

My suspicion is that Wolfe regards myths as essentially elemental and atomic, both in reality and in literature, but in the corroded and corrupted world of Urth, they appear in impure compounds and alloys, rather than in pure ingots of the refined metals themselves.

Bearing in mind Wolfe's avowed belief in the physical and spritual reality of the classical gods, not as rivals to the one God, but as created, lesser, "spiritual" beings, nevertheless far above, in power and majesty, mortal human beings, it is not hard to see how the hieros and hierogramates of the Urth cycle might fall into the same sort of theological pattern. They are "gods", but not "Gods", and, in some neo-platonic ("post-platonic"?) way their natures and intentions will reflect the same underlying and recurrent patterns that appear throughout history and in all corners of the universe.

But just as, in generic terms, Wolfe fuses fantasy and science fiction to produce a hybrid "science fantasy", so he intertwines physical reality with the spiritual and theological. The two are inextinguishable in his universe, and it becomes both possible for naturalistic, real, physical agents to carry out divine purposes and for the apparently divine to harbour only too imperfect and selfish political aims of their own.

None of which diminishes the reality of the moral choices that Wolfe asks his characters to make - it merely complicates them to the nth degree!

By the way, remind me to expatiate some time on my theory as to the tension between "grace" and "works" in Wolfe's stories...

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