

Earth to Urth Pt 1: Grace and Works

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 06 May 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1618>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Nigel Price — 06 May 1999, 19:59

Having accidentally achieved notoriety through featuring in the subject heading of one of Jonathan Laidlow's more controversial recent postings to this list, I thought that I would make a fool of myself in my own right this time and submit some of the random thoughts that I have been jotting down and sending to the aforementioned Jonathan over the last few days when both of us should probably have been busy doing something else...

--0-0--

* Grace and Works *

I think that the tension between grace and works has been a key issue for Wolfe, who has said in a number of interviews that the trouble with the people of Urth is that they have stopped striving and exploring, and are just sitting back on their laurels. The theme is there very strongly in "Operation Ares", which was his first book, and keeps on resurfacing throughout his work. In "Ares", the United States has turned its back on science in general and the space race in particular and, as a result, has begun to slip into economic and technological decay. The presence of uncontrolled packs of imported African animals wandering America seems to be his metaphor for an inverted social and technological order, and I'm not sure that the imported alien animals of Urth don't have a similar symbolic function.

The relationship between "grace" and "works" is one of the key debates in the apostolic letters in the New Testament, and subtle (and not so subtle) differences of emphasis and interpretation on this issue have historically been part of the theological differences between Catholic and Protestant theology. Leaving such subtleties aside for the moment, the doctrine of grace states that there is nothing anyone can do to deserve God's favour. It is a free gift, given out of love to those that will accept it, and cannot ever be earned. The doctrine of works, on the other hand, stresses that anyone who has received God's favour ought to be so grateful that they should live the sort of loving and caring lives that show they are following God's/Christ's example.

As a practical, working man, and an engineer at that, Wolfe seems highly wary of any doctrine of grace that leaves works out of the question and implies that it's enough just to sit back and receive. Clearly this attitude goes hand in hand with his Catholic faith, that demands some sort of energetic response, whilst at the same time emphasising the vast gap between Creator and creature, and the latter's inability to fully understand the former, let alone do anything to please him.

Seen from this perspective, the story of "Kevin Malone" starts off as a sort of oblique allegory of grace, in which the handsome young couple receive a lovely house and a luxurious life style simply as a free gift from an unknown benefactor. When, instead of appreciating their good fortune, they become indolent, bitchy and potentially violent, the tables are turned and they are thrown out and possibly sentenced, in the wife's case, to become the victim of a ghostly repetition of an earlier murder. Now, I'm not saying that that's all that's going on in "Kevin

Malone", but it does seem to be at least part of the picture. The fact that Kevin becomes their judge and possibly executioner rather than their benefactor, whilst a perfectly spooky and surprising transformation, may also fulfil some perception Wolfe has about the way that divine justice works. Nothing ever maps one to one with Wolfe, but I do wonder whether he is not toying in some way with Christ's role as both saviour and judge, as described in John's gospel, where Jesus explains that in one sense he does not have to judge because those who reject him have essentially chosen their own judgement.

(Sorry that this is inevitably more theological than some of my other Lupine theories...)

The application to Urth would be that the population have accepted grace without gratitude, and have thus brought judgement on themselves. If this is the case, then I would see the primary scriptural template for their experience being the parable of the talents. They had the talents, but failed to put them to any use, and were thus condemned when the accounts were audited.

Or something like that.

--0-0--

Footnote:

As I explained to the unfortunate Mr Laidlow in a recent and astonishingly dull video that I sent him, Wolfe seems to be playing an interesting theological word game in "Kevin Malone" that involves what I've heard described as "para-punning". The game, if I've understood it correctly, is to deploy the two different meanings of a word in a story without ever actually using the word itself. You just imply it as a tacit form of word play.

The two examples that I think I've spotted in "Kevin Malone" surround the words "grace" and "fall". I'm positive of the latter, fairly sure of the former.

In everyday usage, "grace" refers to the pleasing and stylish performance of a task or action. Theologically, as pedantically described above, it refers to God's unmerited favour towards humanity.

The advertisement that the narrator answers at the beginning of the story appeals for an "Attractive young couple, well educated and well connected..." This seems to evoke the ordinary, secular meaning of "grace". The handsome young couple, especially once they are ensconced in luxury at The Pines, certainly exhibit style and, thus, "grace".

But the generous free provision of a mansion, servants, and even a daily cash allowance (an important, gratuitous detail), surely is meant to evoke, in some symbolic fashion, the theological meaning of "grace". The young couple are recipients of a sort of theological grace, but their response is limited to the display of a purely secular grace. They are curious as to their benefactor's identity, but certainly not generous in spirit, as their spiteful treatment of Priest the butler shows.

So... "Grace" is never mentioned, but is nevertheless evoked in both its contrary meanings. That's the theory, anyway.

The second example of "para-punning" is one I'm absolutely sure of. The young couple lose their place at The Pines at a very specific time of year: "The poplars lost their leaves in one October week..."

In other words, their fall from grace actually takes place in the fall. In American usage, the season the British refer to as autumn is known as "fall". But, theologically, "the Fall" refers to Adam and Eve's sin, their punishment by God and expulsion from the garden of Eden. It's the fall season, and the young couple endure a sort of symbolic "Fall".

Nigel Price
Minety, Wiltshire

"Carry On Torturer": Jim Dale IS Severian!