

Messianic? - AHA

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 18 Nov 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1963>

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.

Alex David Groce — 18 Nov 1999, 18:41

Aha. Thanks, Roy. I was under a misapprehension--I think we're in much closer agreement than I would have thought about things--our final interpretations still differ, but are based on similar grounds.

When he lies to himself he distorts reality, or rather, his perception of it. When he then relates his perceptions to the reader he is lying to the reader by commission; when he fails to relate something altogether he is lying by omission. I cannot seriously entertain the notion that he lies to himself but tells the truth to the reader.

I guess the difference between formal and material lies comes in here--a formal lie is when person X, __knowingly__, states something untrue, __knowing__ it to be untrue (so, stating something that you don't realize implies something that you know is untrue isn't a formal lie, nor is knowingly stating something you believe to be true which is, in fact, false). There are actually some other caveats (I believe, for ethical/moral consideration, which is where this comes into play, that, for instance, telling an SS man "no Jews are hiding in my attic" is not a formal lie), but this is the gist of it. I think of "lying to one's self" as being actually believing, perhaps through willful inaction of the reason, things that are untrue. If you KNOW a statement to be untrue, in a complete sense, you cannot "tell yourself" it is true. Thus, "lying to himself" means, I think, things Severian believe that are false--possibly in good faith, possibly out of laziness or an unwillingness to really consider something unpleasant.

I'm not making these quotes up. Wolfe put them in for a reason, I suppose, not just to pad the text. We can argue about which things Severian relates that he is not telling the truth about, to what extent he is not telling the truth, why he left out something that obviously should have been in his account, but I don't think it can be doubted that not everything he tells us is the truth.

Gotcha. While I probably grant Severian much more awareness and insight than you do, we agree here. Severian (I think) has a deep insight into the events occurring, but not a complete understanding--even after the transformations at the end of URTH, he is not all-aware (vastly more so than before, yes, but not completely).

I'm even rather surprised that devout Christians aren't outraged at comparisons of Sev to Jesus. Perhaps they are; this list is hardly representative of the people who read Wolfe. To me, despite the parallels, Sev of the Urth Cycle is about as far from the character of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels as two members of the same species can be.

Well, speaking as a Christian, I'd be annoyed if someone said "Jesus sure did act a lot like Severian," and I find the interpretation that reads Severian to literally BE the Second Coming as silly (and explicitly rejected by Wolfe). On the other hand, that Severian is a cad at times and never does seem to reform on the matter of faithfulness to women doesn't prevent him from being a Christian figure; a process is involved in perfection, in Christian theology, and in general there is no implication that the Christian will never fail to obey God, at least certainly not in what I'm assuming is Wolfe's theology-- otherwise the Sacrament of Reconciliation would be

useless. After all, the apostles are "Christic" figures but spend much of the New Testament not getting it and doing the wrong thing; Peter's denial was terrible, but in the end it did not make him another Judas.

You know all the points where they correspond; let me point out some rather glaring contrasts. Jesus never killed anyone. He didn't have sex with every female he could get his hands on. He knew who his parents were. He didn't earn his daily bread by being very good at hurting people. He was not a soldier. He was not a temporal ruler. He never slept with his grandmother. He didn't have a sister or wife, etc., etc.

Ah, this is quite right, and one thing Clute seems to have difficulty dealing with--as a CHRIST figure, Severian's rather blasphemous and (given the context doesn't mesh well with that) ridiculous. Severian is not intended to actually BE the Christ of the Parousia. Rather, he is a human figure, an ordinary man drawn (by implication by divine action) into becoming the instrument of events that have a strong typological resemblance to the events of the Second Coming. Severian's "Revelation" isn't a real eschatology, but it figures the real deal--it is a secular salvation for Urth. In this sense, it is quite Christic--the eschatological Christ, coming in glory and judging the quick and the dead. As this isn't the final coming, the "salvation" offered is the influx of energy from the New Sun, extending the temporal duration of life on Urth (now Ushas, it is so transformed) into some indefinite future. The mass destruction Severian brings is, in one sense, of course, truly terrible and regrettable, but in another sense it is necessary for the revitalization of Urth--without the floods and destruction of the New Sun, the future is that of Master Ash; surrender to the ice. Severian kills everyone, but to fail to do so is to kill the Green Man. There is no morally neutral action here, thanks to the way time interacts; Severian can choose the future, but he cannot fail to act.

Now, there's a nasty line here morally--after all, Communism, which Wolfe seems to hate with a mighty passion (and here I concur) justifies things along the same line--Stalin must kill these 30 million so that the "happy good time" may come and we avoid the terrors of capitalism extending into the future. The difference, I suspect, as Wolfe sees it, is that (A) Severian doesn't take much pleasure in it all, and seems to genuinely mourn for those slain, and in fact assumes he will be among them, one way or another and (B) (this is the controversial one) unlike Stalin, it looks like Sev. has strong indications from the Increate that this is the way to go; the game IS rigged, although Severian has a meaningful choice in the matter--Wolfe's playing, as we've noticed before, fast and loose, but deep, with matters of free will here. Just because actions are "awful" from a human perspective doesn't mean that they can't be commanded by divine will, in traditional Christian (and Jewish) theology--even though he doesn't sacrifice Isaac, that Abraham was WILLING to do so is, from our point of view, a "terrible" thing; however, to ask such things is, at times, the way of God--the OT is pretty heavy on this stuff, requiring personal slaughter in war of greater numbers for reasons less clear than those given for the floods that bring Ushas. The NT is less obviously bloody, but the final eschatology is still in terms of separating the wheat from the chaff and burning the later. Simply the introduction of Christianity into the world, after all, caused the deaths of, at least, the martyrs, in the short term--for greater renewal in the end.

Now, because it isn't real, there's no way to finally, metaphysically find out whether Severian was right--Christians, I suppose, must see it as "if this had been real, and God had a hand in it, he was right to do as he did." But even in a secular reading, which leaves out a lot of what helps judge the actions involved, Severian isn't quite acting purely as an earthquake or a volcano (though, as Job shows, these are the Increate's servants also)--the structure of the story is such that he must make a choice to either allow Ash's future to come, or to bring the New Sun. He KNOWS, without any way of doubting it (this is where he has a huge moral leg up on Stalin/Mao, in another way), that one path, contingent in part on his actions, leads to the utter end of Ragnarok, ice forever. He also knows that there is a different, and, we would all agree, I think,

better, future possible--that of the Green Man. He does not, until near the end of Urth, truly know what the consequences of the New Sun will be, though he must suspect they will be both wonderful AND terrible.

(On the other hand, outside of all this, I think part of it comes down to how Severian rubs you--I like him a lot, as a man, though he has his flaws.)

If Wolfe intended Sev to be seen as Christ-like, why make him so unchristian? If Tzadkiel and his followers were meant to be angelic, why make them liars and deceivers, puppet masters in a shadowy theater? Why the images of hell in Yesod? Wolfe is at least sending mixed messages.

Hmmm... I'm still not convinced that Yesod is meant to be hell-like, I get more "Wizard of Oz" man behind the curtains like--only here, behind the curtain are strange things that neither Severian nor we fully comprehend. And, of course, the statement that "many have called me a liar" by Tzad doesn't seem too sinister if you consider who might have called Tzad a liar--Abaia, Erebus, and co. would surely say Tzad is a liar, just as Lucifer told Eve that God lied when he said the fruit meant death. I think Wolfe is, in part, trying to show that it IS all a bit of a puppet-show, in that though the actors have free will, in the end the ACTOR, the AUTHOR, is really putting on the whole show; remove his granting existence, and it all vanishes, without even a puff of smoke. Even Abaia and Erebus, though free to rebel, are not capable of escaping the iron grasp of the Increate's Plan.

When he writes that he lies to himself, the reader is given warning that all that he relates cannot be trusted to be true. People who lie to themselves do so because they cannot face the truth. Human nature is such that people lie to themselves about things that they regard as important to their sense of self-identity, self-worth, the core values of their being. This colors and otherwise distorts their worldview; all that they perceive is filtered through that lens. This causes people to see things not as they are, but as their ego will allow them to see them.

This is true, but I think it's just about as true of David Copperfield, Ishmael, the nameless narrator of THE BROTHER KARAMAZOV, the old "authorial persona as narrator," and Huckleberry Finn as it is of Severian. I'm certain that I lie to myself; I hope that because of this admission you will suspect the things I say, but not TOO much; after all, you all do the same. :) It's certainly dead on with the view of reality I presume Wolfe holds that "we see through a glass darkly." If anything, the Christic imagery in his story and the eschatological foreshadowings of a "New Sun" that doesn't just let photosynthesis get back to normal (or better) suggests that Severian has more of a glimpse of the real than most narrators.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)
Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department
8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066
<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

Jim Henley — 18 Nov 1999, 21:47 · follows Alex David Groce

The fascinating exchange between Alex and Roy has clarified a separate recent thread for me - whether UOTNS is somehow extraneous. I'm more convinced than ever that the answer is No. UOTNS exists precisely (in part) to rub our noses in the costs of bringing the New Sun. You can say, Yeah it's all implied in the four books, particularly in Dr. Talos's play, to which I'd say that "implied" comes a good bit short of the experience of being shown, as we are in Urth, and who would trust that little weasel anyhow? You could even say that your fine inferences from the first series have the emotional force of encountering the line "Nessus drowned two days ago," but I'd suspect you were putting at least one of us on.

Note that "you" is the impersonal pronoun and should not be used as the basis of any actual cash wager. Consult your doctor.

Best,

Jim

"It ain't the knife thru your heart that tears you apart
it's just the thought of someone sticking it in"
-- Graham Parker, "Protection"

Michael Straight — 19 Nov 1999, 09:11 · follows Jim Henley

On Thu, 18 Nov 1999, Alex David Groce wrote:

Severian's "Revelation" isn't a real eschatology, but if figures the real deal--it is a secular salvation for Urth. In this sense, it is quite Christic--the eschatological Christ, coming in glory and judging the quick and the dead. As this isn't the final coming, the "salvation" offered is the influx of energy from the New Sun, extending the temporal duration of life on Urth (now Ushas, it is so transformed) into some indefinite future. The mass destruction Severian brings is, in one sense, of course, truly terrible and regrettable, but in another sense it is necessary for the revitalization of Urth--without the floods and destruction of the New Sun, the future is that of Master Ash; surrender to the ice.

Does Urth have rainbows? Did the Increate forget his promise to Noah? Or might this be a clue that Urth is not our world, but perhaps another (earlier?) iteration of the universe in which God did not promise there would be no more universal floods? Or maybe it's our universe, but the story of God's promise to Noah is false.

(Did we already discuss this question? It seems familiar, but I can't find it in the archives.)

-Rostrum

Alex David Groce — 19 Nov 1999, 12:24 · follows Michael Straight

Re: Noah

Hmmm... It may not be that universal a flood--there are clearly islands and survivors. In fact, I would guess it's returning coastlines to where they are in our day--massive icecaps formed by Old Sun melting back to good old 20th century icecaps level (okay, maybe 20th century + serious global warming level, but you get the picture). How close is Nessus to the coast?

(I think this list is active because every now and then it starts random spurts of activity, while Whorl is dead because we're all hypothesized out. We really don't know enough yet to start in on OBW's mysteries--imagine how silly much of our speculation would have looked if we'd started in on SHADOW when only it was published...)

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)

Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department

8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>