

C.S. Lewis

The Urth list — 7 messages, 4 voices, 27 May 2000

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2272>

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akt — 27 May 2000, 02:08

Vizcacha said:

I refer again to C. S. Lewis's position, explicated somewhat in _Out of the Silent Planet_ et seq., that space travel (or possibly only space colonization) and immortality are sins. This is a thread not far below the surface in much of _New Sun_ and even in other works by Wolfe.

And Rostrum replied:

It's a fine point, but he didn't think space travel and immortality are themselves sins, rather they are a bad idea because they would allow sin to grow beyond it's current bounds of time (a lifetime) and space (Earth).

I would appreciate more on this. I've read these books (not for years, true) without conciously picking up these points. And does Wolfe really echo them? Typhon, who lives for centuries, is bad. But the Green Man, Sev himself, everyone on the starship are not immortal, but are long-lived. Tzad is probably immortal (but also supernatural).

-alga

Daniel Fusch — 27 May 2000, 07:49 · follows akt

From: akt at attglobal.net

I would appreciate more on this. I've read these books (not for years, true) without conciously picking up these points. And does Wolfe really echo them? Typhon, who lives for centuries, is bad. But the Green Man, Sev himself, everyone on the starship are not immortal, but are long-lived. Tzad is probably immortal (but also supernatural).

-alga

I'm interested in this, too. I have only a vague recollection of "Out of the Silent Planet," but didn't that novel end with the antagonists being sent back to earth so that they would not pollute the peaceful inhabitants of an Edenic paradise with vain and self-destructive philosophies?

Incidentally, I remember the same thread appearing in L'Engle's work--A Wrinkle in Time--with the difference that the silent planet was there a shadowed planet. The similarity was that travelers from earth were viewed with suspicion (at first) on the planet neighboring Camazotz, once the inhabitants learned of their origin.

But, not to meander--wouldn't the Green Man be an example of redeemed humanity, or the Urth equivalent thereof? In the Green Man's time, Urth has already been transformed into Ushas, there is a new sun, and the world is filled with verdure and life.

As for the state of affairs on Urth, it seems to me that the Autarchs have closed the roads, abandoned spaceflight, etc., not to prevent humanity from spreading like a plague and infecting the rest of the universe, but rather to lock society into an earthbound holding pattern, so that the Autarchs can maintain a status quo until the coming of the New Sun. The alternative, from the Autarchs' point of view, would be endless warring, the ceaseless rise and collapse of empires, turmoil without end; they have tried every system of government available throughout the millenia, but none of these have worked. Vodalus' dreams of progress and glory are illusory; from this view, conquest of the stars would simply increase the scope of the turmoil that is human history.

Therefore, it is necessary to lock everything in place until the New Sun comes to make all things new both spiritually and physically.

From the old Autarch's death scene in Citadel:

"I stand...you will stand...for so much that is wrong.... Because all else is worse. Until the New Sun comes, we have but a choice of evils. All have been tried, and all have failed. Goods in common, the rule of the people...everything. You wish for progress? The Ascians have it. They are deafened by it, crazed by the death of Nature until they are ready to accept Erebus and the rest as gods. We hold humankind stationary...in barbarism. The Autarch protects the people from the exultants, and the exultants...shelter them from the Autarch. The religious comfort them. We have closed the roads to paralyze the social order.... Until the New Sun...."

This paralysis allows the Autarchs to keep the society in stasis--and thus in peace and order--as they wait for the New Sun. The Autarchs would be fatalists, if it were not for their certainty of the coming of the New Sun and the rebirth/renewal of Urth.

Meanwhile--I think--some of the Hierodules drop by periodically to help guide humanity and prepare everything for the New Sun. I think. I've never been entirely clear on the role of the Hierodules in their ministering to humanity. But then, I don't know whether Severian was entirely clear on that point, either.

The short version of all this is that immortality and the colonization of space are sinful only in the sense that they are self-destructive. By spreading across the universe, homo sapiens does not harm others so much as harm itself, by increasing the political, economical, and social chaos of the species. I'm not certain whether Wolfe addresses the issue of immortality, but I suspect that if he did his ruling would be that immortality is not sinful in of itself, but is inherently perilous and detrimental because it extends one's sinful or chaotic condition. Death--as long as the world and humanity as a whole is in a decaying state--is not necessarily a bad thing; an eternity of decay would be worse. However, I have no textual support at hand for this, so this remains mere speculation.

What do you think?

Daniel

At 12:49 AM 5/27/2000 PDT, you wrote:

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That would seem to be so. Eden restored and transformed.

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I was much surprised when I interviewed Wolfe to learn that Cordwainer Smith was not much of an influence on him. *Scanners Live in Vain* has the same theme, and in both cases we are retelling the transition from the Old Covenant Under Law to the New Covenant Under Grace. The Law of Yahweh/Moses freezes people to prevent their becoming worse, and the same is true of Taboos in all Archaic cultures. From a Christian standpoint, the Levitical laws are the "true" form of such taboos. Then Jesus comes, the New Son/Sun (Malachi chapter 4) and such freezing is no longer necessary. In Smith, he is Adam Stone, both of whose names are significant. (In case anyone does not catch it, God and the Messiah are repeatedly called the Rock in the Bible, especially in the Psalter.)

"Freezing" is just Wolfe's implied metaphor, because the alternative eschatology that leads to Master Ash is the increase of this freezing until the world is completely Ragnaroked.

It's interesting to compare/contrast "Scanners" and *Severian.* Smith tells the story from the standpoint of the Jewish Sanhedrin (the scanner corps), who by the Law keep dead men "alive" in the "great pain" of cursed space (where rat-dragons live and prey on men). Wolfe tells the story more from the standpoint of the pagan world, especially Rome, enabling Wolfe to bring in "everything under the sun" as he tells the story.

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Well, they are kind of like angels in the Old Testament, and (from Wolfe's standpoint) the kindly angels who ministered in pagan cultures before the coming of Christianity.

Nutria

Michael Straight — 27 May 2000, 22:35 · follows Jim Jordan

This poem gives a pretty clear picture of Lewis's thoughts on the subject, although he didn't publish it in his lifetime, so he may have had reservations about the ideas (or about the way he expresses them here).

PRELUDE TO SPACE

An Epithalamium

So Man, grown vigorous now,
Holds himself ripe to breed,
Daily devises how
To ejaculate his seed
And boldy fertilize
The black womb of the unconsenting skies.

Some now alive expect
(I am told) to see the large,
Steel member grow erect,
Turgid with the fierce charge
Of our whole planet's skill,
Courage, wealth, knowledge, concentrated will;

Straining with lust to stamp
Our likeness on the abyss--
Bombs, gallows, Belsen camp,
Pox, polio, Thais' kiss
Or Judas', Moloch's fires
And Torquemada's (sons resemble sires).

Shall we, when the grim shape
Roars upward, dance and sing?
Yes: if we honor rape,
If we take pride to fling
So bountifully on space
The sperm of our long woes, our large disgrace.

(From *_Poems_*, ed. Walter Hooper, p. 56.)

I can't remember where Lewis talks about our limited lifespan as a mercy, lest a bad man continue to get worse and worse without limit. Maybe in *_The Abolition of Man_* or *_The Problem of Pain_*.

An amusing aside, there's another poem by Lewis, "An Expostulation Against Too Many Writers of Science Fiction," where he complains of people writing science fiction adventure stories that could just as easily take place anywhere on Earth:

Why should I leave this green-floored cell,
Roofed with blue air, in which we dwell,
Unless, outside its guarded gates,
Long, long desired, the Unearthly waits,
Strangeness that moves us more than fear,
Beauty that stabs with tingling spear [...]

(Ibid, p. 58.)

-Rostrum

I can see why Lewis never published "Prelude to Space." It's awful, just awful! The fragment of the second one is much better and the title is funny: "An Expostulation Against Too Many Writers of Science Fiction." Hmmm. I hadn't known that he identified himself at all as a SF writer.

-alga

Michael Straight — 28 May 2000, 22:31 · follows akt

On Sun, 28 May 2000 akt at attglobal.net wrote:

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Yeah, I don't know that Walter Hooper is doing Lewis any favors publishing some of this stuff, but it does give a pretty clear picture of his thoughts on the matter.

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What I think is funny is that he could complain about too many SF writers in 1959. What would he think of shelves full of Star Trek tie-ins?

-Rostrum

Daniel Fusch — 29 May 2000, 05:01 · follows Michael Straight

From: Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu>

Yeah, I don't know that Walter Hooper is doing Lewis any favors publishing some of this stuff, but it does give a pretty clear picture of his thoughts on the matter.

Rather like cleaning out a dozen old file cabinets. This happens to most great writers, I think, sooner or later!