

tolkien, platonism, mythology

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 21 Aug 2001

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Dan — 21 Aug 2001, 17:41

Nigel Price wrote:

So: the physical world as a reflection of divine reality, myths as the recurring patterns whereby the physical world reflects that greater reality, and myths as symbolic statements of enduring psychological truths.

The way you phrased this immediately reminded me of Tolkien's idea of sub-creation: any myth-creation, by virtue of being an act of creation, must and will reflect divine reality. In fact I think Tolkien goes on record to say that reading and writing mythology is a surer way to discover the truth about the world than philosophical speculation.

As you say, myths deal with archetypes of human thought and behavior. If in fact the world and human nature are created as a function of some divine principle, then a myth that accurately portrays those archetypes, that mimics the physical and psychological world, will be (a) interesting for a long period of time to a lot of people and (b) contain true insight into the more enduring causes of the universe. And because the myth-maker in essence seizes upon the divine, creative principle in order to create the myth he (or she, more likely) has no choice but to sub-create a world that is like in nature to the greater creation. Or, as Severian says to Ceryx in UotNS: I doubt whether you can seize the Increate's power without becoming like him.

I wouldn't elaborate on this except that it seems like Tolkien's aesthetic has gotten short shrift in the archives, and since we know that Wolfe read a lot of Tolkien's friend and intellectual disciple--certainly in this area--C.S. Lewis, this is undoubtedly a source to take into consideration.

And too it seems to have special bearing on Wolfe's detective fiction. I too think the detective story is a modern mythology--though I would argue, Nutria, that it's a Modern mythology that only realized an explicit Christian element under Chesterton's tutelage. It's a mythology unique to modernity in particular, I think, because the most important element is the "decypherability" of the crime. Usually by the tools of Reason, and Reason, personally exercised reason--whether you are a layman with your own Bible, a (Baconian) scientist, a voter, a consumer--is the *raison d'etre* of modernity. And of course as we got increasingly gloomy about Reason the myth took new forms: Kafka, for instance, turned the tale on its head with *The Trial*, gave us guilt with no crime and thus no solution.

But while Wolfe seems to like Kafka (*There Are Doors* -- people objected to the unbelievability of C-5 or whatever the alternative universe was called -- made a lot more sense to me as a Kafkaesque fairy-tale and something of a rebuttal to *The Castle*) I don't think he shares Kafka's gloominess. The detectives, professional and amateur, have problems that they solve, usually with a combination of reason and metaphysics, and so of course Wolfe is trying to tell us that our own universe is similarly tractable. But the real genius of his sub-creation is that he doesn't only **tell** us that but presents us, his readers, with our own puzzles to work out, giving us -- as Nigel pointed out earlier -- exactly as much information as we need to do so.

Is this a Platonic exercise? With my limited experience with Plato I am inclined to say no--Plato, for instance, thought poets and their shady (shadowy?) lyricisms should be banished from the Republic. On the other hand Plato does make reference to the gods and the Homeric legends, but those references are clearly to be used only as exhibits in a thought-experiment: he wants his interlocutors to reason through why the gods are described as behaving in a certain manner. I suppose it all depends on whether Wolfe thinks his stories are good, *qua ipso*, or merely tools to describe some higher reality -- whether that be our own "real" world or something higher still. I certainly think the stories good in their own right.

Dan

vivez sans temps mort!

Michael Straight — 22 Aug 2001, 10:42 · follows Dan

On Tue, 21 Aug 2001, Dan wrote:

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Further support for your thesis: comparing traditional modernist detective stories with Umberto Eco's postmodern detective story, *_The Name of the Rose_*. In which there is no pattern, no answer to the mystery, except what the detective creates. In which, by looking for a "solution," to the mystery behind the deaths, the detective creates one that wasn't there.

-Rostrum

Alex David Groce — 22 Aug 2001, 13:13 · follows Michael Straight

Rostrum wrote:

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I'm just quoting this, but the whole detective discussion is interesting. I agree that Wolfe's "baptized" detective fiction derives from Chesterton (*_Nightside_* being practically Father Brown in space, and I now wonder if the long climbing scenes don't owe a bit to *_Manalive_*), who was, despite his reputation for paradox and whimsy, a devotee of reason in his own fashion. "The Detective of Dreams" is very much a Chestertonized Poe tale, where Reason points the way to Faith. Wolfe's *_realities_* are at heart of Aquinas rather than Kafka or Eco (there is an underlying truth, approachable at least by reason). The psychology of Wolfe's characters is considerably less "solvable," I would argue--more the infinite depths and

profundities of mystery as expounded by Augustine or Pascal than the rational enumeration of faculties of Aristotle and Aquinas. The motives of numerous Wolfe characters remain hidden, guessable from the outside (and even with 1st person narrators, we are always outside) or dimly perceived through lies and self deceptions, but in the end not amenable to something like Freud's detective work. Dorcas in BOTNS, the narrator of "Seven American Nights," and of course Dennis Alden Weer are examples (at least for me).

Also, (and this drifts into whorl territory) the Short Sun narrator spends quite a bit of time in detective mode, as Silk did in Long Sun (ask for an exorcist, get a detective for free, etc.). I don't have IGJ with me, but someone asks him about mystery, and he says something like: "I don't enjoy mysteries for their own sake. I try to clear up mysteries wherever I find them." I suspect this is Wolfe talking to the reader as well, and that he thinks the clues are there to solve the many (for me) still obscure aspects of the Short Sun books. I think that one reason the revelation about identity made at the end of RttW is so explicit (if debatable in its exact meaning) is that Wolfe thinks the psychological mysteries are much harder to solve or even impossible, and this one must be seen by the reader for Short Sun to work.

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

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

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

8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066

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