

The Best Introduction to the Mountains

The Urth list — 9 messages, 6 voices, 03 Jan 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2881>

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.

Russell Wodell — 03 Jan 2002, 00:57

Many thanks to Andy Robertson for posting this fascinating essay.

There is much to discuss (for example, that Wolfe seems to have even lousier taste in poetry than Tolkien).

Two points:

(1) Ursula K. LeGuin long ago wrote the perfect riposte to Wolfe's political take, complaining that "Sam... keeps saying 'sir' to Fordo until one begins to have made visions of founding a Hobbit Socialist Party."

(2) In Wolfe's account of allowing himself to read "no more than a single chapter each evening," but allowing himself to re-read the book up to that point as many times as he wishes, do we not have the source for Latro's having to re-read his own life each day?

Russell Wodell

Andy Robertson — 03 Jan 2002, 00:23 · follows Russell Wodell

----- Original Message -----

From: "Russell Wodell" <hse at telus.net>

There is much to discuss (for example, that Wolfe seems to have even lousier taste in poetry than Tolkien).

I disagree, but then I would.

(1) Ursula K. LeGuin long ago wrote the perfect riposte to Wolfe's political take, complaining that "Sam... keeps saying 'sir' to Fordo until one begins to have made visions of founding a Hobbit Socialist Party."

Michael Moorcock famously said "I am an Orc"

Matthew Davis — 03 Jan 2002, 03:05 · follows Andy Robertson

If you want to read LOTR as one of the last gasp of anglo-catholic feudalism then you couldn't go amiss reading it alongside "Brideshead Revisted" (in fact now I remember that Humphrey Carpenter has written extensively about both Tolkien and Waugh.hmmm) and also tracking down the massive one-volume collection of Evelyn Waugh's non-fiction. Waugh is always articulate, concise and rarely fuddy-duddy in expressing what burgeoning socialist, industrial modernity means in the sense of loss of a unified vision of society where all men at different stage contribute to the commonweal of a society and how this is embodied in a national tradition to which everyone participates. Just as Tolkien offers a vision of Elves, Dwarves,

wizards, Hobbits, etc contributing each in their specific fashion and all the made-up traditions and languages which he always say was the underlying reason for LOTR.

As for poetry - yes, it does seem that English speaking Catholics in the twentieth century lost all sense of taste. There is a pervading stink of Chesterton and snug-room balladry.

Adam Stephanides — 03 Jan 2002, 16:59 · follows Matthew Davis

on 1/2/02 8:53 AM, Andy Robertson at andywrobertson at clara.co.uk wrote:

----- Original Message -----

From: "Adam Stephanides" <adamsteph at earthlink.net>

I haven't looked at MEDITATIONS ON MIDDLE-EARTH, but possibly Wolfe's essay

was rejected because the image of Tolkien as propagandist for a society in which the lower orders cheerfully obey and serve their betters was not one the editor wanted to project.

But no, no, no, Wolfe is not propagandising for feudalism.

Not feudalism, but an idealized version of Merrie Olde England, in which the squire or local aristocrat (or factory owner) is the acknowledged leader of the community, dispensing counsel and noblesse in exchange for the gratitude and obedience of the little people; but with some opportunity for social mobility thrown in. In other words, an organic society, and one which would in practice require strict limitations on the free market to maintain, although I'm sure Wolfe thinks of himself as a libertarian too.

I understand that could be a mistake one would make reading this essay, but he is talking about something much more like libertarianism: freedom, liberty and *property*. . This has absolutely nothing to do with supporting tyranny, (and if conservatism is about supporting tyranny, Wolfe is not a conservative)

That reading, though, doesn't account for this passage:

"Philology led him [Tolkien] to the study of the largely illiterate societies of Northern Europe between the fall of Rome and the beginning of the true Middle Ages (roughly AD 400 to 1000). There he found a quality -- let us call it Folk Law -- that has almost disappeared from his world and ours. It is the neighbour-love and settled customary goodness of the Shire. Frodo is "rich" in comparison to Sam, though no dragon would call Frodo rich; Sam is poor in comparison to Frodo, though Sam is far richer than Gollum, who has been devoured by the tyranny and corruption of the One Ring. Frodo does not despise Sam for his poverty, he employs him; and Sam does not detest Frodo for his wealth, but is grateful for the job. Most central of all, the difference in their positions does not prevent their friendship. And in the end, poor Sam rises in the estimation of the Shire because of his association with Frodo, and rich Frodo sacrifices himself for the good of all the Sams.

"A different illustration is found among the elves of Lorien, in their love of beauty and their love of nature. They are Sylvan Elves (East Elves) but the rulers they choose to obey are Eldar (West Elves). They choose to be ruled by people better than themselves, in other words, exactly as we choose to be ruled by people worse. Most clearly of all it is shown in their will to preserve the wisdom of the First Age.

"Earlier I asked what Tolkien did and how he came to do it; we have reached the point at which the first question can be answered."

Wolfe's illustrations of Tolkien's "discovery," which he allegedly wrote LOTR to propagandize for,

both center on the willingness of people to serve and be led by their "betters."

And if he is really talking about libertarianism, it's curious he should pick the "Dark Ages" as his exemplar, a time not particularly known for security of property.

Between this and Wolfe's comments on 9-11 I'm learning more about Wolfe's politics than I think I want to know, and I fear for THE WIZARD KNIGHT.

Wolfe is a Conservative Catholic Christian right-winger. Deal With It!!!!

I knew that (although I was unpleasantly surprised to learn that he advocated deporting all non-citizens). But his sudden political outspokenness has me worried that THE WIZARD KNIGHT may be an explicitly propagandistic book, as his other books haven't been. I'm not fond of didactic novels, even when they express points of view I agree with.

Lafferty, whom I also love, is an even more right-wing Catholic than Wolfe, but he's eccentric enough so that even his didactic stuff is interesting, though not his best work. This isn't true of Wolfe, IMO.

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 03 Jan 2002, 17:01 · follows Adam Stephanides

on 1/2/02 6:57 PM, Russell Wodell at hse at telus.net wrote:

There is much to discuss (for example, that Wolfe seems to have even lousier taste in poetry than Tolkien).

The Thoreau bit (which I rather liked) was also quoted in "Death of the Island Doctor," iirc. I hadn't known it was by Thoreau, though.

--Adam

Andy Robertson — 03 Jan 2002, 17:36 · follows Adam Stephanides

----- Original Message -----

From: "Adam Stephanides" <adamsteph at earthlink.net>

Not feudalism, but an idealized version of Merrie Olde England, in which the

squire or local aristocrat (or factory owner) is the acknowledged leader of

the community, dispensing counsel and noblesse in exchange for the gratitude

and obedience of the little people; but with some opportunity for social mobility thrown in. In other words, an organic society, and one which would

in practice require strict limitations on the free market to maintain, although I'm sure Wolfe thinks of himself as a libertarian too.

Absent the silly sneers, "an organic society" is the just word

I think a quick summary of Wolfe's position on social hierarchy would be. Someone is going to be in charge. No society has ever dodged inequality. In an "organic" society those on top are linked by moral bonds to everyone, including the very poor. In short, if they are "better" than the lower orders, they had damn well better act better, not simply richer.

Just how Wolfe hopes to get from here to there he does not state. It's a dream, not a map. Criticise away.

Lafferty, whom I also love, is an even more right-wing Catholic than Wolfe,
but he's eccentric enough so that even his didactic stuff is interesting,
though not his best work. This isn't true of Wolfe, IMO.

But Wolfe's most deeply political works include, for example, "The Eyeflash Miracles", "The Hero As Werwolf", and "The Death of Doctor Island".

In these and many others Wolfe sets out a little guy getting crushed by the actions of a universalist, and supposedly benevolent, State.

The political message is not the whole of these stories, but it is unmistakable: the government is more dangerous than any tyrant, because it acts under a fiction of the greater good.

Surely this is obvious?

Andy R

Thomas Bitterman — 03 Jan 2002, 20:00 · follows Andy Robertson

Andy Robertson wrote:

The political message is not the whole of these stories, but it is unmistakable: the government is more dangerous than any tyrant, because it acts under a fiction of the greater good.

Surely this is obvious?

Andy R

Which is obvious?:

- a) the government is more dangerous than any tyrant?
- b) that this is what Wolfe thinks?

If we stick with b), it might be interesting to note that (afaik) Wolfe has not written a story in which the government is a theocracy. It's easier to criticize from the outside. It might also bring up some embarrassing situations for the RCC, Wolfe's church of choice and possibly the most bureaucratic institution on the planet.

Tom

Andy Robertson — 03 Jan 2002, 19:06 · follows Thomas Bitterman

----- Original Message -----

From: "Thomas Bitterman" <tom at bitterman.net>

Which is obvious?:

- a) the government is more dangerous than any tyrant?
- b) that this is what Wolfe thinks?

b) of course.

I guess we should attempt to sheer off from direct political arguments, but it seems legit to discuss Wolfe's politics in connection with his writing.

I agree that he is good at showing what he thinks is *wrong*, but of course it is much harder to try to show and defend what is *right*.

I would suggest that the Whorl books contain a lot of experimental writing about the forms of politics.

If none of the city-states described there are utopian, I can only suggest that that is because Wolfe does not think Utopia achievable in this life.

Andy R

James Jordan — 03 Jan 2002, 23:16 · follows Andy Robertson

Politics and Religions are supposed to be off-limits in polite conversation, but when discussing Wolfe they are inescapable. So, without wishing to open a can of worms, I'd like to try to shed a tad (only a tad) of light on how Wolfe almost certainly thinks about the following observations from Adam.

A couple of selected quotations from Adam:

I haven't looked at MEDITATIONS ON MIDDLE-EARTH, but possibly Wolfe's essay was rejected because the image of Tolkien as propagandist for a society in which the lower orders cheerfully obey and serve their betters was not one the editor wanted to project.

and

Wolfe's illustrations of Tolkien's "discovery," which he allegedly wrote LOTR to propagandize for, both center on the willingness of people to serve and be led by their "betters."

And if he is really talking about libertarianism, it's curious he should pick the "Dark Ages" as his exemplar, a time not particularly known for security of property.

The "Christian model" of societal hierarchy, to which Wolfe surely subscribes, and which people on this list are free to reject, affirms the following matters, among others:

1. The poor you will always have with you. Some people just won't be able to "make it."
 - 1a. Corollary: Some people need to be taken care of, by others.
2. Some people have a gift for leadership, and others (most) are gifted in other areas of life.
 - 2a. Corollary: Pure democracy is nonsense, though a relative democracy such as the American Constitution envisioned is a good thing. To wit: a variety of ways of selecting leaders, checks and balances in a diversified government, and rulers at various levels (county, state, federal) -- all of which is a Protestantized feudal order.
3. People usually but not always grow into their callings as a result of their upbringing.
 - 3a. Corollary: Some kind of political aristocracy, with sons (and daughters nowadays) reared for rule, is inescapable: Kennedys, Bushes, etc. The "skull & bones" elite." The Eastern Establishment. Etc.
4. The way differently gifted people relate to one another should be through mutual service and joy in being who they are and in doing what they do best. The artisan enjoys his work, and does it to produce things for others to buy. Same with the auto mechanic. Same with the ruler, who is to serve his people with wisdom. This is not a matter of "lessers" serving "betters," but of mutual service of various sorts. Jesus said, "He who would be great among you must be slave of all." One example: Entrepreneurs become rich by seeing what other people need and/or want, and by serving them by providing it. Monopolists, on the other hand, become rich by "lording it over" other people, and preventing competition.
 - 4a. Thus, Samwise (wise) enjoys being Sam. He would not enjoy being Aragorn. Neither would I, and I would not be any good at being Sam either -- my automobile is worked on by others; they serve me by fixing it, and I serve them by paying them.

In short, some kind of societal hierarchy is inescapable. The questions are whether those who rule do so by "lording it over" others, or by serving them; and whether those who are ruled delight in being freed from the burdens of rule so that they can happily pursue their callings, or desire to usurp functions for which they are not gifted and not prepared; and whether the ruled are perhaps provoked to consider such a usurpation by the evil behavior of the rulers.

Thus, I did not read Wolfe's article as saying that Tolkein had "discovered" a society where the lessers delight to serve their betters -- though Adam may be right that those who rejected his essay thought he was saying this -- but as saying Tolkein was reflecting on the nature of societal hierarchy as delineated above. The society of Tolkein's and Wolfe's vision is not "equality" (i.e., identity, everyone the same), but "mutuality" (everyone serving everyone else with his/her particular gifts).

Finally, "dark ages" is just sarcasm. What most of us were taught in high school about this period is mostly rubbish, and Wolfe knows it (or believes it, anyway).

Nobody has to agree with Wolfe (or me) about any of this. I just offer it as a way of understanding where he is coming from. FWIW. Feel free to push "delete," but read the next paragraph first:

On another topic: Wolfe's statement that he read only one chapter per day of LOTR is surely a clue as to how he has written his own epic works, and how they might be profitably read, such as carefully taking into account what things are put together in each chapter.

Patera Nutria