

The Best Introduction to the Mountains

The Urth list — 32 messages, 8 voices, 03 Jan 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2882>

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treilly — 04 Jan 2002, 11:44

Yes, the naive political content certainly detracted from the admirably heartfelt remainder. Can it be seriously questioned that societies of hundreds of millions require more complex self regulation than Anglo Saxon tribes of a few thousand at most? Bureaucratic this might be, but there are worse things than bureaucracy. I suppose Wolfe must say he would prefer to live among the Goths and Vandals than in Rome of the same era. I would prefer now, and Rome next.

The (Heinleinesque) political asides irresistably reminded me of Sir Peter Medawar's comment on a similar essay by C S Lewis idealising the traditional feudal relationship of old England where every man knew his place and was happy. Medawar pointed out that of course Lewis in writing this unquestionably envisaged himself as lord of the manor! The same assumption runs deep in Wolfe's words.

I will try to find the exact quote when I return home to Sydney in a few weeks.

Tim

This message was sent through MyMail <http://www.mymail.com.au>

Adam Stephanides — 04 Jan 2002, 15:31 · follows treilly

on 1/3/02 5:16 PM, James Jordan at jbjordan4 at home.com wrote:
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:

[summary snipped]

I agree that these are probably Wolfe's political views, with a couple of exceptions:

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, in inescapable: Kennedys, Bushes, etc. The "skull & bones" elite." The Eastern Establishment. Etc.

This I'm not so sure about. None of Wolfe's "good rulers" are reared for rule that I can recall, although Silk is "bred" for rule. And surely you didn't mean to imply that Wolfe sees "Kennedys, Bushes, etc. The "skull & bones" elite. The Eastern Establishment. Etc." as the sort of people who should be running things. With the possible exception of the Bushes, these are precisely the sort of people he despises.

This is not a matter of "lessers" serving
"betters," but of mutual service of various sorts.

Here I disagree. Wolfe does believe in "betters," which implies the existence of "lessers," even if he doesn't use the latter word. Quoting again from his essay, the Sylvan Elves "choose to be ruled by people better than themselves...": not better at governing, but better period. Examples can be found in his fiction, too: Silkhorn is better than the people around him, and the protagonist of "Tracking Song," as a true human, is better than the animal-people he moves among.

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.

I'm not sure if you're objecting specifically to my use of the word "discovered," but while the specific word may not be in Wolfe's article, I think it accurately reflects it:

"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 seems to me that Wolfe does indeed think that Tolkien "discovered" a society which followed the principles you listed, however one wishes to describe it. I certainly don't get the impression Wolfe regards Tolkien as a political philosopher.

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).

I'm aware that the popular stereotype of the "Dark Ages" is thoroughly misleading; that's why I put it in quotes. Wolfe used the term himself, and I don't think he's being sarcastic. And it is true that there wasn't much security of property in Europe between 400 and 1000 A.D.

--Adam

James Jordan — 04 Jan 2002, 18:03 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam,

Thanks for your reply. Just a few clarifications, bearing in mind that all we want to do in this discussion is to understand what Wolfe thinks:

I wrote:

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, in inescapable: Kennedys, Bushes, etc.
The "skull & bones" elite." The Eastern Establishment. Etc.

You replied:

This I'm not so sure about. None of Wolfe's "good rulers" are reared for
rule that I can recall, although Silk is "bred" for rule. And surely you
didn't mean to imply that Wolfe sees "Kennedys, Bushes, etc. The "skull &
bones" elite. The Eastern Establishment. Etc." as the sort of people who
should be running things. With the possible exception of the Bushes, these
are precisely the sort of people he despises.

To be sure. I was speaking generally, that some kind of ruling elite is inescapable in every society. Becoming part of the class usually involves some kind of adoption or marriage into it. Americans like to pretend that there is no such class in America, but of course there is and always has been. It's not a "conspiracy," of course. An interesting book on this, a few years old, is by Konolige, *The Power of Their Glory: America's Ruling Elite, the Episcopalians.* They called America an "episcocracy." Of course, there were non-episcopalians (Rockefeller) in this goodoldboy network, and in recent years, Jews have been able to "join." But you're right, I did not mean that Wolfe would like the Kennedys, or that he would like the fact that you cannot become President unless you are a Freemason.

And of course, the existence of such a class need not be the whole story. In the Severian Quintet, the Autarch is not part of that class, and deliberately so, as a check and balance in the society.

Me:

This is not a matter of "lessers" serving "betters," but of mutual service of various sorts.

You:

Here I disagree. Wolfe does believe in "betters," which implies the existence of "lessers," even if he doesn't use the latter word. Quoting again from his essay, the Sylvan Elves "choose to be ruled by people better than themselves...": not better at governing, but better period. Examples can be found in his fiction, too: Silkhorn is better than the people around him, and the protagonist of "Tracking Song," as a true human, is better than the animal-people he moves among.

Hmmm. I guess it's the sense of "betters" that is at issue. Silkhorn is morally better, and the protagonist of TS is higher on the "evolutionary" scale. I took Wolfe's sentence about the elves to mean "better at ruling," since that was the context ("ruled by people better than themselves"). I'm used to how this works in my field (theology): the Son subjects himself to the Father, though they are ontologically equal. Parents are "betters" and children "lessers," but only in such a governmental sense, not in other possible senses. Given Wolfe's familiarity with Thomas Aquinas, I impute such a meaning to him. But I can admit that his brief statement was not fully clear, and that there may be something to what you say.

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.

I'm not sure if you're objecting specifically to my use of the word "discovered," but while the specific word may not be in Wolfe's article, I think it accurately reflects it:

"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 seems to me that Wolfe does indeed think that Tolkien "discovered" a society which followed the principles you listed, however one wishes to describe it. I certainly don't get the impression Wolfe regards Tolkien as a political philosopher.

No. I was not objecting to your word. I thought a bit of nuancing of "lessers serving betters" would be helpful; thus, my post. I was not writing to criticize at all, just to expand the discussion

a little. Since I myself am sympatico with Wolfe's religious and political views, in the main, I thought explaining a bit of how such views work "from the inside" might be of help to some on this list.

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).

I'm aware that the popular stereotype of the "Dark Ages" is thoroughly misleading; that's why I put it in quotes. Wolfe used the term himself, and I don't think he's being sarcastic. And it is true that there wasn't much security of property in Europe between 400 and 1000 A.D.

Hmm. Well, given Wolfe's description of the times, I took it that he does not think they were all that "dark," and thus was being a bit sarcastic. But it's neither here nor there. (Again, "dark" in what sense?) And I certainly agree about the insecurity of those times!

Jim Nutria Jordan

Adam Stephanides — 04 Jan 2002, 19:49 · follows James Jordan

Andy, I think you're putting too much emphasis on the libertarian elements in Wolfe's political thought (which are certainly present), at the expense of his call for submission to legitimate authority, which is just as important, if not more so. This is clear in the opening paragraphs of Wolfe's essay, both the very first paragraph--one of the "definite duties" of "Dark Ages" peasants was submission to those whom God had appointed to rule over them--and the code of conduct Wolfe learned from his father: "Legitimate authority was to be obeyed without shirking and without question." It's also evident in Wolfe's example of the Sylvan Elves, which I quoted earlier.

It's found in his fiction, too, I think, though less prominently (as you said, he's more detailed on what's wrong than with what's right). But Silkhorn does rule Gaon, and there's no suggestion that the Gaonese would be better off without his rule. A big reason why New Viron is such a mess, iirc, is that none of the "leading citizens" are willing to submit to another's authority. And TBOTNS, as I noted earlier, ultimately comes down very strongly against rebellion.

And afaik, in none of his works does Wolfe reject the state in toto, merely unjust states. (And I would disagree with your reading of "The Death of Doctor Island." Doctor Island represents authority in general, not just the state.)

--Adam

Thomas Bitterman — 04 Jan 2002, 21:32 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam Stephanides wrote:

Andy, I think you're putting too much emphasis on the libertarian elements in Wolfe's political thought (which are certainly present), at the expense of his call for submission to legitimate authority, which is just as important, if not more so. This is clear in the opening paragraphs of Wolfe's essay, both the very first paragraph--one of the "definite duties" of "Dark Ages" peasants was submission to those whom God had appointed to rule over them

This pretty standard Catholic fare for every society everywhere. See, for example: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03794b.htm>, which states: "Love for his country will lead the citizen to show honour and respect to its rulers. They represent the State, and are entrusted by God with power to rule it for the common good. The citizen's chief duty is to obey the just laws

of his country. "

--and the code of conduct Wolfe learned from his father:

"Legitimate authority was to be obeyed without shirking and without question."

This may actually be a heresy (kind of, it is described as "now abandoned by all Catholics, and has become obsolete"), and it's unlikely Wolfe means it in the simple sense in which it is stated. See, for example: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02137c.htm> : "A legal enactment may be immoral, and then it cannot in conscience be obeyed; or it may be ultra vires, beyond the competence of the authority that enacts it, in which case compliance with the law is not a matter of obedience, but of prudence. "

on the same page, Pius IX (in his *Syllabus*) condemns the following statement: "It is allowable to refuse obedience to lawful princes, and even to rebel against them"

Perhaps he has reserved some wriggle-room in "legitimate", but it seems unlikely given the "Luciferian" element in Vodalus's opposition to the autarch. Wolfe seems to be implying that any form of civil disobedience is immoral. I can't find a better cite, but see: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03794b.htm>: "According to that teaching citizens are religiously bound to reverence and obey their civil rulers in all matters which belong to the sphere of civil government."

And afaik, in none of his works does Wolfe reject the state in toto, merely unjust states. (And I would disagree with your reading of "The Death of Doctor Island." Doctor Island represents authority in general, not just the state.)

This is straight Catholic doctrine again: from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03794b.htm>, quoting Leo XIII in "Immortale Dei": "Man's natural instinct moves him to live in civil society, for he cannot, if dwelling apart, provide himself with the necessary requirements of life, nor procure the means of developing his mental and moral faculties. Hence it is divinely ordained that he should lead his life, be it family, social, or civil, with his fellow-men, amongst whom alone his several wants can be adequately supplied. "

Catholics have traditionally been Aristotelian (man as a social animal, naturally impelled to form a state) as opposed to contractualists (like Hobbes, where forming a society is purely a matter of choice). This alone would make this topic difficult for a Catholic/libertarian mix.

On the topic of the progenetic model of leadership, any comments on the theory that Silk is a clone of Pas? It would support this model, and make it easier for an eventual Pas takeover of Silk (as, for, what happened with Oreb).

Pas comes off as a very Gnostic-type figure, aping the Catholic social order in which everybody has their own special talents. It is interesting of Wolfe to turn the tables on the Gnostics. In "standard" Gnostic cosmology, the "real" God lies outside of the lower order the demiurge (ie, the Catholic God) rules over. In the Whorl the Catholic God is outside, and the demiurge is inside, and the "Gnostic" Silk is actually correct. But this post is getting too long already.

--Adam

Tom

Andy Robertson — 04 Jan 2002, 21:46 · follows Thomas Bitterman

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

From: <treilly at ozemail.com.au>

Medawar pointed out that of course Lewis in writing this unquestionably envisaged himself as lord of the manor! The same assumption runs deep in Wolfe's words.

Nonsense.

Wolfe is what we call a Nerd, in this decadent age, and in a better one would call an Artisan. His interest is in working quietly, cunningly, and well; his hope is to be ruled by a true and good King; and his nearest self image (in his works) is the protagonist of PEACE.

This is obvious from his books. Severian is no self-image of Wolfe: I never read a less convincing portrayal of the interior monologue of an aggressive and sexually violent man. Silk, celibate and constantly suffering for his high status, is something Wolfe is much happier with.

Andy R

Andy Robertson — 04 Jan 2002, 22:15 · follows Andy Robertson

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

From: "Adam Stephanides" <adamsteph at earthlink.net>
Andy, I think you're putting too much emphasis on the libertarian elements in Wolfe's political thought (which are certainly present), at the expense of his call for submission to legitimate authority, which is just as important, if not more so.

I think you are right. "Libertarianism" was just my retreat from having to explain all that stuff that Patera Nutria explained so much better than I ever could.

Without flattering you all, I realise am going to have to post at a rather higher level of sophistication than I expected to keep my nose above water here.

Andy R

James Jordan — 05 Jan 2002, 02:46 · follows Andy Robertson

At 10:15 PM 1/4/2002 +0000, Andy wrote:
Without flattering you all, I realise am going to have to post at a rather higher level of sophistication than I expected to keep my nose above water here.

Yeah. You'd better do that. Last year one of the older members of this list, code-name Severian III, visited someone who had put up some sloppy posts and cut the fingers off his left hand. Severed them. So, be warned. And be afraid. Very afraid.

Nutria Monomanus

Adam Stephanides — 07 Jan 2002, 05:33 · follows James Jordan

on 1/4/02 3:32 PM, Thomas Bitterman at tom at bitterman.net wrote:
Perhaps he has reserved some wriggle-room in "legitimate", but it seems unlikely given the "Luciferian" element in Vodalus's opposition to the autarch. Wolfe seems to be implying that any form of civil disobedience is immoral.

In other works Wolfe approves not just of civil disobedience but of revolution: Silkhorn leads a revolution in Dorp, and Wolfe endorses the revolution that is gathering at the end of "Bluesberry Jam" (perhaps his silliest story). (I can't put my hands on my copy of FREE LIVE FREE at the moment, and don't remember whether the Quadrumvirate were to have been revolutionaries.) Which raises the question, of course, of how one knows when rebellion is allowable. The Autarch's rule in BOTNS seems on the face of it more tyrannical than the judges in Dorp, yet Wolfe approves of the latter rebellion and denounces the former ones.

--Adam

Andy Robertson — 07 Jan 2002, 11:39 · follows Adam Stephanides

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

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

In other works Wolfe approves not just of civil disobedience but of revolution: Silkhorn leads a revolution in Dorp, and Wolfe endorses the revolution that is gathering at the end of "Bluesberry Jam" (perhaps his silliest story).

"Hour of Trust" is the obvious one here.

I can't put my hands on my copy of FREE LIVE FREE at the moment, and don't remember whether the Quadrumvirate were to have been revolutionaries.) Which raises the question, of course, of how one knows when rebellion is allowable.

The crucial point here is that the criterion of whether revolution is allowable is not the form of government that is being rebelled against, but the character of those in control. Rebellion against evil rulers is permitted.

This is for various reasons a very difficult thing to explain to most contemporary liberals.

Marxism designates all non-Communist forms of government as "immoral" by their *form*, not by their actions: the function being, of course, to validate the left's eternal quest for power, domination and control, by validating an eternal attack on culture, customs, and morals .

The Catholic (I should say "typical human") view is slightly different. A society is likely to be well ruled if good people are in control. The form of government is not unimportant, but it is not of primary importance, since no form of government can by itself guarantee virtuous behaviour by the rulers.

Andy R

matthew.malthouse — 08 Jan 2002, 10:34 · follows Andy Robertson

On 02/01/2002 21:51:06 James Jordan wrote:

Wolfe did have some nice things to say about Stephen Lawhead, to me, a few years ago. I imagine he considers Lawhead to be carrying the Tolkein torch pretty well. Never read Lawhead myself.

I've read "Taliesin", the first of his Aurtherian cycle. It was excruciatingly bad. Simply bad use of language. Normally I'm quite uncritical on a first reading and if I get through a book I want to read the rest. In this case I couldn't, and still can't, bring myself to buy any of the others. "This is not a book to be set aside lightly..."

That said I have also read "Empyrion" and I think I was surprised that it wasn't quite so bad.

However I don't think I've ever reread it which, given that I'll read almost anything several times, suggests that I was deeply unimpressed.

Matthew

Adam Stephanides — 08 Jan 2002, 15:43 · follows matthew.malthouse

on 1/7/02 5:39 AM, Andy Robertson at andywrobertson at clara.co.uk wrote:

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

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

In other works Wolfe approves not just of civil disobedience but of revolution: Silkhorn leads a revolution in Dorp, and Wolfe endorses the revolution that is gathering at the end of "Bluesberry Jam" (perhaps his silliest story).

"Hour of Trust" is the obvious one here.

I think that Wolfe disapproves of the revolution there, though he doesn't like the corporate forces of order either (but I'd have to read it again to be sure).

I can't put my hands on my copy of FREE LIVE FREE at the moment, and don't remember whether the Quadrumvirate were to have been revolutionaries.)

I looked at a copy at a bookstore, and they weren't, or at least there's no indication that they were.

--Adam

Andy Robertson — 03 Jan 2002, 10:57 · follows Adam Stephanides

There is a reference to "The Wild Knight" in "Silhouette", the story with icefoam set in a decaying spaceship. The character is reading an e-book sort of thing.

I doubt one reader in a thousand has read the poem or knows who it is by.

Just be thankful Wolfe didn't go the whole hog and start on Belloc, eh?

Andy R

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

From: "Matthew Davis" <matthew at michaelscycles.freemove.co.uk>

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.

Michael Straight — 29 Jan 2002, 20:01 · follows Andy Robertson

This is a post I composed and mailed right when the list went dead last month. I'll understand if no-one wants to continue this conversation...

Date: Thu, 10 Jan 2002 11:05:34 -0500 (EST)

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

To: urth at lists.best.com

Subject: Re: (urth) Re: The Best Introduction To The Mountains

On Sun, 6 Jan 2002, Adam Stephanides wrote:
revolutionaries.) Which raises the question, of course, of how one
knows when rebellion is allowable. The Autarch's rule in BOTNS seems on
the face of it more tyrannical than the judges in Dorp, yet Wolfe
approves of the latter rebellion and denounces the former ones.

How does Wolfe "denounce" rebellion against the Autarch in BOTNS? He shows that the Ascian rulers are bad, probably worse than the government of the Commonwealth, and he shows that Vodalus is no real revolutionary (he just wants to seize power for himself and his friends) and a dupe besides.

As it turns out, the aliens are supporting and using the Autarchy for ends that Wolfe seems to think are ultimately good, but I can't see how you read that as saying Wolfe would condemn a true revolutionary movement that was trying to overthrow the Autarch not because they oppose the New Sun or want to seize power for themselves but to free themselves from tyranny.

-Rostrum

Questions or problems: write ranjit at urth.net

Andy Robertson — 30 Jan 2002, 13:27 · follows Michael Straight

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

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

How does Wolfe "denounce" rebellion against the Autarch in BOTNS? He shows that the Ascian rulers are bad, probably worse than the government of the Commonwealth, and he shows that Vodalus is no real revolutionary (he just wants to seize power for himself and his friends) and a dupe besides.

As it turns out, the aliens are supporting and using the Autarchy for ends that Wolfe seems to think are ultimately good, but I can't see how you read that as saying Wolfe would condemn a true revolutionary movement that was trying to overthrow the Autarch not because they oppose the New Sun or want to seize power for themselves but to free themselves from tyranny.

Politically, no-one seems to have mentioned Wolfe's only direct statement on the subject:

Severian: "Unite? Shout? I know that you have isolated yourself, Master, to fix your mind on higher things, but I would not have thought any man could know so little of the land in which he lives. Carreerists, mercenaries, and young would-be adventurers fight the war. A hundred leagues south it is less than a rumour, outside the House Absolute".

Master Ash: "Your Commonwealth is stronger than I would have believed, then. No wonder your foes are in despair".

All of this signals that the government of the Commonwealth is a mystery, its weaknesses strengths, its disunity hiding a flexible union-in-diversity that is highly evolved and exquisitely tuned to survival. Attempts to understand the politics of Severian's nation are doomed unless this is understood.

It is a nation that exists by divine right, and speaks for the whole of Urth.

In LITTLE,BIG, John Crowley hypothesised that the Holy Roman Empire had, through a process of

amalgamation, extension, and withdrawal, moved to become the contemporary USA.

I wonder if Wolfe sees his Commonwealth as the Holy Roman Empire, extended yet further into the future?

hartshorn

Questions or problems: write ranjit at urth.net

Michael Straight — 30 Jan 2002, 15:58 · follows Andy Robertson

On Wed, 30 Jan 2002, Andy Robertson wrote:

Politically, no-one seems to have mentioned Wolfe's only direct statement on the subject:

Severian: "Unite? Shout? I know that you have isolated yourself, Master, to fix your mind on higher things, but I would not have thought any man could know so little of the land in which he lives. Careerists, mercenaries, and young would-be adventurers fight the war. A hundred leagues south it is less than a rumour, outside the House Absolute".

Master Ash: "Your Commonwealth is stronger than I would have believed, then. No wonder your foes are in despair".

All of this signals that the government of the Commonwealth is a mystery, its weaknesses strengths, its disunity hiding a flexible union-in-diversity that is highly evolved and exquisitely tuned to survival. Attempts to understand the politics of Severian's nation are doomed unless this is understood.

To me, all that quote says is that the war is so far away, and the enemy so comparatively weak, that the Commonwealth can fight with an army of volunteers. If the enemy were stronger, the war would press closer to the Commonwealth and there would be a need to conscript soldiers from among the populace.

That other stuff about unity-in-disunity you must be getting from somewhere else in the book.

It is a nation that exists by divine right, and speaks for the whole of Urth.

Do the Hierodules have a particular love for the Commonwealth, or is the institution of the Autarchy merely a means of raising up someone who could speak for the whole Urth? Severian doesn't automatically get to speak for Urth just because he's Autarch of the Holy Roman Commonwealth. If that were true, Ymar could have brought the New Sun.

Does Erebus support the Ascians against the Commonwealth because the Commonwealth is some kind of Holy Empire that he opposes, or do the Hierodules support the Commonwealth merely as a means of keeping the evil of Erebus in check?

And, to return to the original point, how on Urth does any of this constitute Gene Wolfe expressing the opinion that rebelling against tyranny is wrong?!?

-Rostrum

Questions or problems: write ranjit at urth.net

James Jordan — 30 Jan 2002, 16:45 · follows Michael Straight

Hartshorn wrote:

In LITTLE,BIG, John Crowley hypothesised that the Holy Roman Empire had, through a process of amalgamation, extension, and withdrawal, moved to become the contemporary USA.

I wonder if Wolfe sees his Commonwealth as the Holy Roman Empire, extended yet further into the future?

The Commonwealth is Byzantium.

Rostrum wrote:

"That other stuff about unity-in-disunity you must be getting from somewhere else in the book."

I do think it is there. I had the impression, which being years away from reading the books twice I cannot support directly, that the Vodalus part and the Autarch exist in a kind of tension, perhaps both set up by Severian the Conciliator. I think (think!) Wolfe is saying (a) every society needs diversity of leadership; thus the Autarch and the Aristocrats and also the Rebels; a (b) no society before the end of history will be perfect, so there will always be underground dissenters. Look at it sacramentally. The Autarchy is a kind of Established Church, with the Pope eating the memories of his predecessors via the alzado. Vodalus's band is a kind of Sect Church, gathering in little groups to partake of the alzado sacrament. That's not all there is, of course, but it seems to be part of it.

Rostrum also wrote:

"And, to return to the original point, how on Urth does any of this constitute Gene Wolfe expressing the opinion that rebelling against tyranny is wrong?!?"

Does he? In "Hour of Trust" (*Island of Dr. Death etc.*) Wolfe himself joins a rebellion reciting the Lord's Prayer.

Nutria

Questions or problems: write ranjit at urth.net

Thomas Bitterman — 30 Jan 2002, 18:09 · follows James Jordan

Michael Straight wrote:

And, to return to the original point, how on Urth does any of this constitute Gene Wolfe expressing the opinion that rebelling against tyranny is wrong?!?"

Wolfe is more or less committed to the "rebellion is wrong" party due to his adherence to Catholic theology. From the Catholic Encyclopedia: >>... God is at the back of every State, binding men in conscience to observe the behests of the State within the sphere of its competence.<<

Whether rebelling against tyranny is wrong depends on what is meant by "tyranny". Again, from the Catholic Encyclopedia: >>"a tyrannical law, not being according to reason, is not, absolutely speaking, a law, but rather a perversion of law" (St. Thomas, Summa Theol., Ia, 2ae, q. 92, art. 1, ad 4)<<. If Wolfe is thinking of a tyranny as simply a government which enforces tyrannical laws, then his characters are certainly in the right when they decline to obey such tyrannical laws. It is not clear, however that characters in such a situation have a right (or a

duty) to rebel against such authority.

If Wolfe means by tyranny simply an unpopular dictatorship, then it is clear that his characters have no right to rebel against it. Again, from the Catholic Encyclopedia:

... there must be authority everywhere, and that the authority
existent for the time

being, under such and such a form, be under that form obeyed... <<

It doesn't appear that the Autarch is enforcing any tyrannical laws to speak of, so Severian is clearly required to obey him. It's possible that the failing of one of the earlier versions of Sev was rebelling.

If I had to hazard a guess at the relationship between the Autarch and Vodalus, it would be God:Autarch::Satan:Vodalus. Vodalus is the "Prince of Lies", even to the point of giving his followers fake currency as a token of allegiance.

He also serves

the Autarch, though he does not know it, and so many purportedly evil deeds only turn out to serve good in the end. And for a requisite bit of misogyny it can be noted that Vodalus has a consort, while the Autarch, most pointedly, does not.

-Rostrum

Tom

Questions or problems: write ranjit at urth.net

Jerry Friedman — 31 Jan 2002, 22:40 · follows Thomas Bitterman

--- Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu> wrote: ...

Do the Hierodules have a particular love for the Commonwealth, or is the
institution of the Autarchy merely a means of raising up someone who
could
speak for the whole Urth? Severian doesn't automatically get to speak
for
Urth just because he's Autarch of the Holy Roman Commonwealth. If that
were true, Ymar could have brought the New Sun.

Why? Maybe Ymar was judged unworthy. Or is this something from UotNS, about the memory of
ever having read which I'm in denial?

Does Erebus support the Ascians against the Commonwealth because the
Commonwealth is some kind of Holy Empire that he opposes, or do the
Hierodules support the Commonwealth merely as a means of keeping the
evil
of Erebus in check?

My impression is that Erebus supports (maybe even impels) the Ascians against the
Commonwealth because he wants to enslave everybody and the citizens of the Commonwealth
aren't his slaves. Yet. I don't think we know exactly why the Hierodules oppose him, though the
evil of slavery is a sufficient reason. The good question is the one you asked above: What's the
reason for the Autarchy, and what's its relationship to the Hierodules and the Increate? Can
Severian speak for Urth just because he's Legion?

I don't see any kind of evidence that the Commonwealth is some kind of Holy Empire. The idea
that it's somehow the heir to the Holy Roman Empire strikes me as really sick (not that
someone would have to be sick to make the speculation, but somebody would have to be sick

to see the HRE as so divinely supported that it persists past its official dissolution as a force for good).

And, to return to the original point, how on Urth does any of this constitute Gene Wolfe expressing the opinion that rebelling against tyranny is wrong?!?

Not that I can see.

Jerry Friedman

Andy Robertson — 31 Jan 2002, 23:17 · follows Jerry Friedman

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

From: "Jerry Friedman" <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com>

I don't see any kind of evidence that the Commonwealth is some kind of Holy Empire. The idea that it's somehow the heir to the Holy Roman Empire strikes me as really sick (not that someone would have to be sick to make the speculation, but somebody would have to be sick to see the HRE as so divinely supported that it persists past its official dissolution as a force for good).

I am surprised to find someone reading Wolfe with this sort of binary thinking

The Empire was never simply a force for good. It was **meant** (in Catholic legendarium) to be a pattern of the kingdom of heaven on Earth, with the Emperor being in the position of God.

Not that he would be god, or have divine powers, but that he would show forth the virtues of heaven as far as it was possible for a man.

Of course in reality the Empire became utterly corrupt, and was in fact taken by the forces of Antichrist (as the Turks were thought to be)

This corruption was also worked into the legends.

Now of course Wolfe doesn't think his Commonwealth is the literal descendant of the HRE: but it is like it symbolically, because it is the bit of the Urth uniquely connected to Heaven - or rather to those powers which in Wolfe's universe are the analogs of heaven.

****And Therefore**** it is very corrupt.

If Wolfe thought to trace a historical link, it would be a joke he made. However, symbolically, the Commonwealth is like the HRE.

hartshorn

Michael Straight — 01 Feb 2002, 15:02 · follows Andy Robertson

On Thu, 31 Jan 2002, Jerry Friedman wrote:
Severian doesn't automatically get to speak for Urth just because he's Autarch of the Holy Roman Commonwealth. If that were true, Ymar could have brought the New Sun.

Why? Maybe Ymar was judged unworthy.

He was. That's what I mean. Simply being Autarch of the Commonwealth doesn't automatically mean you have found favor with the Hierodules. You also have to be worthy in some sense.

Ymar was "almost Just" which means he wasn't just. Maybe this is not a backhanded compliment, and Wolfe's point is that no human ruler could be perfectly just. But it also seems to indicate that Ymar and the other Autarchs were widely seen as unjust rulers.

Had there been a genuinely democratic movement to overthrow the tyranny of the Autarchs (unlike Vodalus's self-centered plot to seize power for himself), I can see that Wolfe might think it tragic, in that it would be unknowingly opposing the coming of the New Sun, but I don't see anything in the text to indicate that Wolfe would see such a movement as morally wrong. Nor do I think it makes much sense to pull a few quotes from the Catholic Encyclopedia and think that gives you enables you a complete understanding of Wolfe's political ideas.

-Rostrum

matthew.malthouse — 01 Feb 2002, 15:48 · follows Michael Straight

On 01/02/2002 15:02:05 Michael Straight wrote:

Ymar was "almost Just" which means he wasn't just. Maybe this is not a backhanded compliment, and Wolfe's point is that no human ruler could be perfectly just. But it also seems to indicate that Ymar and the other Autarchs were widely seen as unjust rulers.

Questions lead to questions lead to questions...

Was this quality which the Hierodules particularly chose to judge?

Was Severian to be judged on the same criteria as previous Autarch who submitted themselves to the process?

Would the Hierodules, Tzadkiel, Urth (or even Wolf) see "just" as we might?

As the epitome of Urth surely Severian was judged by far more than a single quality: in fact the crux of the decision seemed to be those who would stank with him and for him rather than any particular interior aspect at the moment he stood in Tzadkiel's hall.

Matthew

Jerry Friedman — 01 Feb 2002, 15:50 · follows matthew.malthouse

--- Andy Robertson <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk> wrote:

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

From: "Jerry Friedman" <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com>

I don't see any kind of evidence that the Commonwealth is some kind of Holy Empire. The idea that it's somehow the heir to the Holy Roman Empire strikes me as really sick (not that someone would have to be sick to make the speculation, but somebody would have to be sick to see the HRE as so divinely supported that it persists past its official dissolution as a force for good).

I am surprised to find someone reading Wolfe with this sort of binary thinking

I'm surprised that someone can tell so much about what I think from one comment as to draw conclusions about my literary tastes.

The Empire was never simply a force for good. It was *meant* (in Catholic legendarium) to be a pattern of the kingdom of heaven on Earth, with the Emperor being in the position of God.

Not that he would be god, or have divine powers, but that he would show forth the virtues of heaven as far as it was possible for a man.

Of course in reality the Empire became utterly corrupt, and was in fact taken by the forces of Antichrist (as the Turks were thought to be)

This corruption was also worked into the legends.

Now of course Wolfe doesn't think his Commonwealth is the literal descendant of the HRE: but it is like it symbolically, because it is the bit of the Urth uniquely connected to Heaven - or rather to those powers which in Wolfe's universe are the analogs of heaven.

The idea I was responding to was that the Commonwealth *was* the literal descendant of the HRE. It seems we agree that that doesn't make sense. However, I went too far in calling the idea "really sick", so I apologize to anyone I offended or insulted.

****And Therefore**** it is very corrupt.

If Wolfe thought to trace a historical link, it would be a joke he made. However, symbolically, the Commonwealth is like the HRE.

Jerry Friedman

Thomas Bitterman — 01 Feb 2002, 22:08 · follows Jerry Friedman

Michael Straight wrote:

Nor do I think it makes much sense to pull a few quotes from the Catholic Encyclopedia and think that gives you a complete understanding of Wolfe's political ideas.

Complete, no. But Wolfe is a dedicated, intellectual Catholic. It seems prudent to assume that he's read both the Encyclopedia and Aquinas (and agrees with them on such an important matter) until proven otherwise. It would be an interesting thing to ask him about in person.

To give some relevance to this discussion I'd predict that none of Wolfe's characters ever approves of a rebellion except when the ruler is clearly tyrannical in the narrow sense used in the Encyclopedia.

For example, Silk has that excuse, but Severian does not. Although it could be argued that Pas/Typhon is a better ruler than the Autarch, Pas/Typhon is tyrannical (due to his opposition to the Outsider) and the Autarch is not.

-Rostrum

Tom

Adam Stephanides — 03 Feb 2002, 15:35 · follows Thomas Bitterman

on 2/1/02 4:08 PM, Thomas Bitterman at tom at bitterman.net wrote:
Michael Straight wrote:

Nor do I think it makes much sense to pull a few quotes from the Catholic Encyclopedia and think that gives you enables you a complete understanding of Wolfe's political ideas.

Complete, no. But Wolfe is a dedicated, intellectual Catholic. It seems prudent to assume that he's read both the Encyclopedia and Aquinas (and agrees with them on such an important matter) until proven otherwise.

The Catholic intellectual tradition is wide and diverse. The Catholic Encyclopedia may state the "mainstream" position, but that doesn't oblige Wolfe to agree with it. Catholics are obliged to accept papal ex cathedra proclamations of dogma, but there aren't too many of those.

To give some relevance to this discussion I'd predict that none of Wolfe's characters ever approves of a rebellion except when the ruler is clearly tyrannical in the narrow sense used in the Encyclopedia.

You quoted the Encyclopedia earlier as quoting Aquinas describing a "a tyrannical law" as "not being according to reason." I don't see that the rulers of Dorp fall under this definition. They're corrupt and unjust, but probably no worse than the average medieval ruler or lord; and presumably Aquinas would not give a definition of tyranny which would justify rebellion against most rulers.

And when Silkhorn gives reasons for rebellion, he says nothing about tyranny. First he explains it on the grounds of necessity for himself, and to keep Beroep and Aanvagen from being ruined; and because the judges are corrupt. (181) Later he tells Capsicum "The judges had taken advantage of their [the people of Dorp's] good qualities, and so the judges had to go; if I had not removed them, the people themselves would have within a few years." He also says, rejecting the idea of overthrowing Gyrfalcon, that New Viron would probably be worse off without him. (275) Silkhorn's criterion, it seems to me, is pragmatic. If rebellion would make people better off, then it's justified; if it wouldn't (which he probably thinks is most of the time), then it's not. I suspect this is Wolfe's criterion as well.

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 06 Feb 2002, 02:35 · follows Adam Stephanides

Sorry this response is so late.

on 1/29/02 2:01 PM, Michael Straight at straight at email.unc.edu wrote:
How does Wolfe "denounce" rebellion against the Autarch in BOTNS? He shows that the Ascian rulers are bad, probably worse than the government of the Commonwealth, and he shows that Vodalus is no real revolutionary (he just wants to seize power for himself and his friends) and a dupe besides.

As it turns out, the aliens are supporting and using the Autarchy for ends that Wolfe seems to think are ultimately good, but I can't see how you read that as saying Wolfe would condemn a true revolutionary movement that was trying to overthrow the Autarch not because they oppose the New Sun or want to seize power for themselves but to free themselves from tyranny.

As the only revolutionary leader in BOTNS, Vodalus represents the idea of revolution. If I read a book in which Lenin played a major role, and turned out to be a tool of Satan, I wouldn't think

that the author probably approved of Communist revolutionaries who weren't tools of Satan.

And I think we're intended to believe the Autarch when he tells Severian that he keeps the society of the Commonwealth frozen in barbarism because "all else is worse," including rule by the people. (Sword and Citadel, p. 356, pb edition.)

I thought I also remembered Severian, or Thecla-in-Severian, admitting that the revolutionary had been a fitting punishment for her, but I can't find the reference.

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 06 Feb 2002, 02:35 · follows Adam Stephanides

on 1/31/02 5:17 PM, Andy Robertson at andywrobertson at clara.co.uk wrote:
Of course in reality the Empire beame utterly corrupt, and was in fact taken
by the forces of Antichrist (as the Turks were thought to be)

I think you're mixing up the HRE and the Byzantine Empire. The HRE was never taken by the Turks; it was dissolved by Napoleon (who no doubt got labelled the Antichrist himself). And I don't think it was particularly corrupt: it just became decreasingly relevant as its component duchies, electorates, etc. became practically independent states.

If Wolfe thought to trace a historical link, it would be a joke he made.
However, symbolically, the Commonwealth is like the HRE.

Wolfe has said that the Commonwealth is modelled on Byzantium, iirc.

--Adam

Jerry Friedman — 06 Feb 2002, 16:33 · follows Adam Stephanides

--- Adam Stephanides <adamsteph at earthlink.net> wrote:
on 1/31/02 5:17 PM, Andy Robertson at andywrobertson at clara.co.uk wrote:
Of course in reality the Empire beame utterly corrupt, and was in fact
taken
by the forces of Antichrist (as the Turks were thought to be)

I think you're mixing up the HRE and the Byzantine Empire. The HRE was
never taken by the Turks; it was dissolved by Napoleon (who no doubt got
labelled the Antichrist himself).

...

ObLit: War and Peace.

Jerry Friedman

Michael Straight — 06 Feb 2002, 19:30 · follows Jerry Friedman

On Tue, 5 Feb 2002, Adam Stephanides wrote:
As the only revolutionary leader in BOTNS, Vodalus represents the idea of
revolution. If I read a book in which Lenin played a major role, and turned
out to be a tool of Satan, I wouldn't think that the author probably
approved of Communist revolutionaries who weren't tools of Satan.

I think that reading is way too allegorical. Maybe Vodalus represents Wolfe's belief that many
(most?) revolutionaries fight to seize power for themselves rather than for any sort of
democratic ideals, but I wouldn't try to argue from there to saying Wolfe revolution is inherently

illegitimate.

And I think we're intended to believe the Autarch when he tells Severian that he keeps the society of the Commonwealth frozen in barbarism because "all else is worse," including rule by the people. (Sword and Citadel, p. 356, pb edition.)

I think we're supposed to believe the Autarch genuinely thinks that. I'm not sure we're supposed to assume he's right.

Severian presents an argument that torture is more humane than incarceration, but I wouldn't try to claim that Wolfe agrees with his reasoning or expects the reader to.

I thought I also remembered Severian, or Thecla-in-Severian, admitting that the revolutionary had been a fitting punishment for her, but I can't find the reference.

Again, Severian might say that because he disapproves of revolution (or because he disapproves of Thecla's particular revolt), but I think that's a weak weak argument for saying Wolfe thinks all revolution is illegitimate.

More likely Severian is just finding morbid humor/irony in her punishment fitting the crime she was charged with, without regard to any political opinions he might have about the legitimacy of those charges.

-Rostrum

Thomas Bitterman — 06 Feb 2002, 23:10 · follows Michael Straight

Adam Stephanides wrote:

on 2/1/02 4:08 PM, Thomas Bitterman at tom at bitterman.net wrote:

Michael Straight wrote:

Nor do I think it makes much sense to pull a few quotes from the Catholic Encyclopedia and think that gives you enables you a complete understanding of Wolfe's political ideas.

Complete, no. But Wolfe is a dedicated, intellectual Catholic. It seems prudent to assume that he's read both the Encyclopedia and Aquinas (and agrees with them on such an important matter) until proven otherwise.

The Catholic intellectual tradition is wide and diverse. The Catholic Encyclopedia may state the "mainstream" position, but that doesn't oblige Wolfe to agree with it. Catholics are obliged to accept papal ex cathedra proclamations of dogma, but there aren't too many of those.

The RCC is pretty picky about things that are merely "teachings" but not dogma. Note the animosity between the Pope and many American Catholics on birth control. Given Wolfe's conservative nature it seems reasonable to believe he submits to most teachings.

You quoted the Encyclopedia earlier as quoting Aquinas describing a "a tyrannical law" as "not being according to reason." I don't see that the rulers of Dorp fall under this definition. They're corrupt and unjust, but probably no worse than the average medieval ruler or lord; and presumably Aquinas would not give a definition of tyranny which would justify rebellion against most rulers.

That's debatable. Church-state relationships were hardly cozy during the period that Aquinas wrote. The fact that most (if not all) medieval rulers were unjust was a handy weapon for the

Pope in those fights.

And when Silkhorn gives reasons for rebellion, he says nothing about tyranny. First he explains it on the grounds of necessity for himself, and to keep Beroep and Aanvagen from being ruined; and because the judges are corrupt. (181) Later he tells Capsicum "The judges had taken advantage of their [the people of Dorp's] good qualities, and so the judges had to go; if I had not removed them, the people themselves would have within a few years." He also says, rejecting the idea of overthrowing Gyr Falcon, that New Viron would probably be worse off without him. (275) Silkhorn's criterion, it seems to me, is pragmatic. If rebellion would make people better off, then it's justified; if it wouldn't (which he probably thinks is most of the time), then it's not. I suspect this is Wolfe's criterion as well.

You give good reasons. I would view Silk, however, in the role of the RCC, not as an ordinary member of society. As the representative of the Outsider on the Whorl (ie, as the representative of God on Earth) he holds ultimate decision-making power over whether a government is legitimate or not. In short (in Whorl terms), the theory is that all government ultimately derives its authority from the Outsider.

In most

cases that authority is implicitly granted by the mere fact of the authority's existence. That does not change the fact, however, that the Outsider (or a suitable representative) can de-legitimize any authority by withdrawing his support. Hence, Silkhorn is not bound by the rules against rebellion because he is not rebelling. He is removing the moral authority underneath the government, making it tyrannical by fiat, so to speak.

--Adam

Tom

Adam Stephanides — 09 Feb 2002, 01:41 · follows Thomas Bitterman

on 2/6/02 5:10 PM, Thomas Bitterman at tom at bitterman.net wrote:
The RCC is pretty picky about things that are merely "teachings" but not dogma. Note the animosity between the Pope and many American Catholics on birth control. Given Wolfe's conservative nature it seems reasonable to believe he submits to most teachings.

There are plenty of conservative Catholics who believe that abolishing the Latin mass was a mistake.

Adam Stephanides wrote:

You quoted the Encyclopedia earlier as quoting Aquinas describing a "a tyrannical law" as "not being according to reason." I don't see that the rulers of Dorp fall under this definition. They're corrupt and unjust, but probably no worse than the average medieval ruler or lord; and presumably Aquinas would not give a definition of tyranny which would justify rebellion against most rulers.

That's debatable. Church-state relationships were hardly cozy during the period that Aquinas wrote. The fact that most (if not all) medieval rulers were unjust was a handy weapon for the Pope in those fights.

While there was rivalry between secular and ecclesiastical authority in the middle ages, the Church had no desire to propound a theory which would give peasants a generalized right to

rebel. Most bishops and abbots were from the nobility, and many exercised temporal lordship in their own right (including the Pope).

You give good reasons. I would view Silk, however, in the role of the RCC, not as an ordinary member of society. As the representative of the Outsider on the Whorl (ie, as the representative of God on Earth) he holds ultimate decision-making power over whether a government is legitimate or not. In short (in Whorl terms), the theory is that all government ultimately derives its authority from the Outsider. In most cases that authority is implicitly granted by the mere fact of the authority's existence. That does not change the fact, however, that the Outsider (or a suitable representative) can de-legitimize any authority by withdrawing his support. Hence, Silkhorn is not bound by the rules against rebellion because he is not rebelling. He is removing the moral authority underneath the government, making it tyrannical by fiat, so to speak.

This is an ingenious argument, but I don't think Silkhorn is the representative of the Outsider on the Whorl. To be sure, Silk was enlightened, and given a mission from the Outsider, but that doesn't make him equivalent to the Pope (if it did, he presumably wouldn't have shut himself up in a hut with Hyacinth for twenty years). Nor are we intended to take his words as divinely inspired a la an Old Testament prophet. Silk certainly doesn't think of himself in these terms. A fortiori this holds for Silkhorn.

--Adam

Michael Straight — 09 Feb 2002, 20:07 · follows Adam Stephanides

On Fri, 8 Feb 2002, Adam Stephanides wrote:
This is an ingenious argument, but I don't think Silkhorn is the representative of the Outsider on the Whorl. To be sure, Silk was enlightened, and given a mission from the Outsider, but that doesn't make him equivalent to the Pope (if it did, he presumably wouldn't have shut himself up in a hut with Hyacinth for twenty years). Nor are we intended to take his words as divinely inspired a la an Old Testament prophet. Silk certainly doesn't think of himself in these terms. A fortiori this holds for Silkhorn.

The more I see those terms, 'Silk' and 'Silkhorn,' the more I think they're backwards. We oughta use 'Silkhorn' for the character named "Silk" in the Long Sun books since he's a mix of the real Silk and Horn's ideas about Silk, and 'Silk' for the narrator of IGJ who knows that he's not the (nonexistent) hero that Horn was sent to find.

"Is that your real name? Silk? Are you the man in the book?" "I don't think so."

(IGJ, p. 207)

I am, of course, 3/4 kidding. But once I finish rereading RTW, I'll post my theories about how much about the varying Horn/Silk ratio in the narrator...

-Rostrum