

Belated thoughts RE: (urth) Shadowy reflections on an

The Urth list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 19 Apr 2002

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James Jordan — 19 Apr 2002, 15:59

At 10:04 AM 4/19/2002, Adam S. wrote:
Nigel observed:

Severian in some sense takes on the role of Christ when he resists Typhon's three-fold temptations, but as the author has insisted elsewhere, Severian is not Jesus...

Dan'I rejoined:

and I insist that this is a case where the author either is -- I was going to say "lying" but let me say instead "being deliberately disingenuous" -- or doesn't know what he's talking about. Or maybe some combination of the two. And it doesn't start with the temptation in the desert.

I mean, come on: his career starts with baptism and ends with resurrection. Before he meets Typhon, he raises the dead, heals the sick, turns water into wine, tames wild beasts, and (I think a case could be made) banishes demons. Not to mention coming back from the dead repeatedly, telling parables (what _do_ you think the stories in the Book of Urth and Sky are?), etc., etc., etc.

Adam saith:

Well, he isn't literally Jesus: he's not God, and his return isn't the Second Coming of Christ (and I've never understood how the events of UotNS are to be reconciled with the Christian eschatological scheme). But I agree that the similarities between Severian and Jesus go far beyond "he's a Christian, and Christians are supposed to imitate Christ."

When I read UotNS, it seemed to me that the portions of the book where Severian is the original Conciliator might have been Wolfe's attempt to imagine why someone might behave as Jesus does in the Gospel of Mark (reluctant to perform miracles, and telling those he's cured not to say anything about it).

It's more than "imitating Christ" and less than "being a new Christ." Rather, the Christian conception is that Christians live "in Christ" and Christ lives "in them." Thus, Christians in a "mystical" way "fill out" the life of Christ, extending it so to speak, into further history. For Wolfe, as for any "high church" Christian (like myself), eating Christ's body and drink His blood in the sacrament is part of this.

Though "Church activities" are way in the background in the Severian series -- about the only thing I recall is the Pelerines, and they aren't exactly an "orthodox Church" -- Wolfe is presupposing that Severian is "extending" Christ's life and work in this "Byzantine-esque" and therefore generally Christian culture.

For Wolfe, such an "extension" means incorporating and new-applying the "best" of pre-Christian paganism; hence, Severian as New Sun is an Apollo-like "application" of Christ, as

well as being a re-publication of reconciliation between God and man and all creation as the Conciliator.

Severian is a special man with certain special God-given talents, provided at a certain time in history. He both abuses and properly uses these special talents. Those things are true, one way or another, for every person.

Now, Severian's applying the "life in Christ" is only possible because aeons ago there lived and died and came to life again the "theoanthropos," who is mentioned only once. Severian is not a new "theoanthropos," but someone living out further the mission of the original and unique "theoanthropos."

This is the sense in which Severian is a "Christian figure" and not an allegorical "Christ figure."

As for how all this fits with conventional Christian eschatology; well, it does not have to. The events are in the midst of history, not at its full end. But the Bible repeatedly uses Flood language to refer to invading armies and other similar disasters, and also relates the Flood to baptism. Thus, Wolfe can have a Flood-event in the midst of history, which is a judgment on an old Ur-world and also a baptism of that world, ushering in a new Ushas world.

Hence I don't think Wolfe is being "deceptive" when he says Severian is not a Christ-figure. He means the book is not an allegory where Jesus himself is being presented in a guise. I hope I've done a little justice to what he means when he says Severian is a "Christian figure." In terms of this, we should not be surprised when Severian and Silk do many Christ-like things and seem to play out the life of Christ in new situations; but we should also not be surprised when they often fail.

All this is, of course, only one dimension of the narrative.

Hope this helps.

Patera Nutria

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 19 Apr 2002, 17:45 · follows James Jordan

Adam and Nutria say a great deal of what I was going to say, in response to Nigel, and frankly better than I imagine I would of said it. I agree with the fundamental point that tBotNS is not an allegory. Tolkien, who "casually" detested allegory, made a careful distinction between allegory and

applicability: in the former, the author forces upon the reader a construct of correspondences between the allegory and the reality; in the latter, the author may consciously create such a construct but leaves it to the reader to discover and accept or reject, or may not consciously create it at all but be satisfied with such correspondences as the reader may discover. (This latter has happened to me at least once, with my

Realms of Fantasy story "Outside the Walls," which has a somewhat Lupine structure -- it's a horror story disguised as a science fiction story disguised as a fairy tale; and I was quite shocked, but pleased, when a reader pointed out to me that underneath all these things, it was a parable of salvation.)

In the case of _tBotNS_, the Severian/Christ correspondences are too many and too complex for "unconscious" to be plausible in such a conscious craftsman (not to say artist) as Jean-Loup.

Since I did not and do not want to say or believe that M'sieu le Loup is fibbing to us, "disingenuous" seemed the kindest word.

Some specifics... Quotes from Adam:

Well, he isn't literally Jesus: he's not God, and his return isn't the Second Coming of Christ ... But I agree that the similarities between Severian and Jesus go far beyond "he's a Christian, and Christians are supposed to imitate Christ."

Exactly my point. Actually, I'm not at all sure that Severian is "a Christian" -- that is, he clearly doesn't (and can't) have literal faith in Christ, of whom he's never heard. He seems, at times, to have some degree of faith in the being known as the Conciliator, and more vaguely in the Theanthropos. Throughout tBotNS we are free to believe that the Conciliator is identical with the Theanthropos; UotNS takes this possibility away (unless we are to consider Severian the Theanthropos, which Wolfe denies and I would not seriously consider).

... I've never understood how the events of UotNS are to be reconciled with the Christian eschatological scheme.

Ummm... which Christian eschatological scheme? If you're an American, you're probably most familiar with the complex schemas propounded by the Baptists and various Fundamentalist cliques. But there is in fact very little agreement among the whole body of Christians on just what the various eschatological statements and prophecies mean, let alone how to fit them into a coherent scheme of Final Things. The only things I think all Christians would agree on are that neither our current lives nor this world will last forever, and that we will be judged after one or both of these things ends and sent to our final eternal destinies. Nothing I see in UotNS actually conflicts with this (though the ability of Severian to come back from the dead apparently at will does add a bit of discomfort).

When I read UotNS, it seemed to me that the portions of the book where Severian is the original Conciliator might have been Wolfe's attempt to imagine why someone might behave as Jesus does in the Gospel of Mark (reluctant to perform miracles, and telling those he's cured not to say anything about it).

Well, Wolfe has described tBotNS as an attempt at theodicy, that is, a justification of God's ways to man. Well, Webster's actually defines it as a "defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil," but I think Wolfe goes farther than that and attempts to explain a great deal of God's, uh, behavior. (The most cogent example of what I'm talking about would not be the classic example of theodicy, Paradise Lost, but CS Lewis' Perelandra -- I am thinking particularly of the scene where the hero, Ransom, struggles with his inability to defeat his possessed foe by argument and brought to the unhappy conclusion that he must fight him hand-to-hand. He is consoled by a Voice saying, "My name is also Ransom.") All of which is to say, yes, whenever we see Sev behaving in a way that parallels what Christ did in the Gospels, we might be looking at some attempt to justify or explain Christ's motivations and behavior to us. I think one of the most touching things about Severian is how embarrassed he often seems to be to be working miracles.

Then Nutria picks it up ...

It's more than "imitating Christ" and less than "being a new Christ."

This is so perfectly what I was trying to say that I bow in awe.

Rather, the Christian conception is that Christians live "in Christ" and Christ lives "in them." Thus, Christians in a "mystical" way "fill out" the life of Christ, extending it so to speak, into further history. For Wolfe, as for any "high church" Christian (like myself), eating Christ's body and drink His blood in the sacrament is part of this.

The only thing I could add to this is that we (the Church) are "Christ's mystical body," and His hands on Earth, doing His work (however imperfectly).

For Wolfe, such an "extension" means incorporating and new-applying the "best" of pre-Christian paganism; hence, Severian as New Sun is an Apollo-like "application" of Christ, as well as being a re-publication of reconciliation between God and man and all creation as the Conciliator.

Yes. And it's very much worth comparing this to the "pagan" deities of tBotLS, who (in general) are not allowing themselves to be the hands of the one God, but rebels against Him, making themselves into gods. (A numerological reflection relevant also to 5HC: "666," the Number of the Beast, is "the number of a man." Kaballistically, 6 is a man and 3 is God; 666 is Man making a God of himself.)

Severian is a special man with certain special God-given talents, provided at a certain time in history. He both abuses and properly uses these special talents. Those things are true, one way or another, for every person.

Yes: one workable definition of "Christian behavior" is "(attempting) the proper use of one's gifts." And, whatever else we may say of Severian, he seems to have an admirably humble awareness that his "gifts" are just that, that they are not of his making, and that he has some responsibility to use them properly. It might be argued that the three moments of "unjust" mercy which inform and, more or less, define his path through tBotNS are precisely refusals to use his gifts (that is, his skill and talent as a torturer) improperly; quite possibly the sparing of Agia in particular is the moment at which his "success" (as over against the failures of the previous Severians) is determined.

This is the sense in which Severian is a "Christian figure" and not an allegorical "Christ figure."

Right. The problem with the term "Christ figure" is that it immediately merges in many folks' minds into "allegory." Severian is not a Christ figure in the way that Valentine Michael Smith, gawdhelphus, is; he's a Christ figure in the way that Frodo Baggins is (something that, to my astonishment, looks as if it may not get lost in the movie trilogy). It's interesting to note that Wolfe goes so far as to provide Severian with explicit links to other such figures, i.e., the wounded thigh; though this (unlike the "other figure") does heal, it never heals completely, and Severian is left to us as a limping metaphor rather than a full allegory.

Hence I don't think Wolfe is being "deceptive" when he says Severian is not a Christ-figure.

H'mmm. Did I say deceptive? (Checks mail archive.) No, I didn't. Whew. He's just being ... h'mmm. Lupine. Literally, no, Severian is not a "Christ" figure. Practically, though, he is figuring Christ in some fairly significant ways.

... we should not be surprised when Severian and Silk do many Christ-like things and seem to play out the life of Christ in new situations; but we should also not be surprised when they often fail.

Right. Completely with you here. My point, I suppose, is that they do this (and Severian particularly) in ways more direct and, well, literal than most of us. Though I suppose that's at least partly a matter of presentation ... I remember I once had an experience at the end of which I said, "That guy was Simon of Cyrene." It was kind of harrowing because by realizing that I realized that I had been one of the guys mocking Christ as He toiled under the cross...

--Blattid/Dan'I

James Jordan — 19 Apr 2002, 19:12 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

At 12:45 PM 4/19/2002, you wrote:

(A numerological reflection relevant also to 5HC: "666," the Number of the Beast, is "the number of a man." Kaballistically, 6 is a man and 3 is God; 666 is Man making a God of himself.)

Don't know what Wolfe thought about this, if anything, but FWIW for those interested:

In Rev. 13 the number is six hundred, sixty, six, not three 6s. A lot of people are confused on this, simply because we say "sixsixsix" and the English could be read either way. The number has to do with rulers who turn against God, and comes from Solomon's defection from God in 1 Kings 10:14, where it signals Solomon's breaking the "three laws of kingship" (Deuteronomy 17:16-17; 1 Kings 10:14ff., 26ff., and 11:1ff.).

"The number of a man" also trips up English readers, and many others. In Greek, "aner" means a specific male person, and "anthropos" a member of humankind. The word here is "anthropos." So, contrary to many attempt to make 666 out to be a numerical code for Nero or someone else whose name gematrically adds up to 666, it really only says, "a human number." Beyond that, it depends on how you take Revelation. I take it as describing, down to chapter 20, the fall of Jerusalem and of Rome. In Revelation, gentiles are called "peoples, nations, tribes, and tongues," while Jews are called "men, anthropoi." Thus, IMO, when Rev. 13 says, IMO, is that the number is an "anthropic" number, it means a "Jewish" number, and again points back to Solomon. The two evil beast powers (Sea and Land) are like Solomon: rulers who turn against God and oppress the people.

More than most wanted to know, I'm sure, but I thought a few might like to see it.

Beyond that: I unfairly wrote:

Hence I don't think Wolfe is being "deceptive" when he says Severian is not a Christ-figure.

And you answered:

H'mmm. Did I say deceptive? (Checks mail archive.) No, I didn't.

My apologies. Did not intend to overstate your case. I wasn't really thinking of your particular sentence when I wrote that, and the quotation marks were not intended as a citation from you but just as a way of generalizing the opinion.

Enjoyed your post muchly.

--Blattid/Dan'l

Nutria/Jim

James Jordan — 19 Apr 2002, 19:39 · follows James Jordan

At 02:20 PM 4/19/2002, you wrote:

On Fri, 19 Apr 2002, James Jordan wrote:

As for how all this fits with conventional Christian eschatology; well, it does not have to. The events are in the midst of history, not at its full end. But the Bible repeatedly uses Flood language to refer to invading armies and other similar disasters, and also relates the Flood to baptism. Thus, Wolfe can have a Flood-event in the midst of history, which is a judgment on an old Ur-world and also a baptism of that world, ushering in a new Ushas world.

Which raises the question again, are there no more rainbows on Urth? (Other than the one Severian pulls butterflies out of, that is.)

-Rostrum

Cool question!! Is history running backwards on Urth, so that we are moving back toward a Garden of Eden with a Green Man? Probably not, I guess. I guess we just have to leave this problem to authorial license.

For those who might not know, Rostrum refers to Genesis 9:11-16.

Hey, I do have an answer, though it may be more than Wolfe intends. The rainbow is generated by the sun. If the Old Sun winks out for an instant before the New Sun kicks in, then briefly there

is no rainbow, so there can be another Flood. Can't recall if this is so, though.
That the best I can do!

Nutria