

King Jesus/Autarch Severian/Calde Silk - Part One

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 10 Nov 2002

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Don Doggett — 10 Nov 2002, 22:58

Hello everyone. This is my first post, though I've been lurking around for months soaking in the great conversation and waiting for an interesting topic of my own. Whamo! As chance would have it, I had just finished my second reading of TBotNS when I came across a book I had never heard of before: King Jesus by Robert Graves. I immediately bought it and read it. To me it was a revelation, not just because it's an incredible and heretical work of art, but because there are so many themes in it that echo through NS, LS, and SS. In some ways (imho, of course) NS is a reworking of Graves' work (why had I never heard of this book before?). But enough intro. I'll dive right in. I think a list is easiest.

1. This is the obvious one. Severian's lameness and the wound on his face. This applies to Silk as well (at least the limp) but this has been discussed before so I'll move on.
2. This one is marginal but interesting. Dorcas appears in KJ as the playmate of the boy Jesus. While they are playing "Noah's Ark" she becomes frightened and runs away. It's on p.166 and it reads like Dorcas and Severian's relationship writ small.
3. Jesus in KJ is a product of the manipulation of bloodlines by devotees of the triple goddess with the goal of creating the second Adam. He is also the grandson of King Herod. Simon son of Boethus to Herod Antipater (Jesus' father): "What if this latest millennium should close with the appearance of a King who combines all the qualities of his predecessors: true born like Adam, sinless like Enoch, faithful like Abraham, wise like Solomon?" p.64 Malrubius to Severian in Citadel: "In you all the divergent tendencies of our race may have achieved synthesis." Silk is also an engineered man displaying most of these qualities. Jesus' cousin John the Baptist is also a product of these sorts of machinations, by adherents to the Goddess. (I immediately thought of Scylla, the undines and the Mother)
4. Severian's multiplicity of personalities has it's echo as well: "But Apollo, who contains within himself the shades of numerous gods and demons is now the sole master of Delphi." p.245 (I'm offering specific quotes, but these themes run throughout the book. It has to be read to be appreciated, unless I'm just waay off base)
5. Jesus to Mary the Hairdresser (Magdalene) servant of the Goddess: "Therefore my fate will be as the Father ordains, not as your mistress ordains. I am released from the jurisdiction of the Female; I have come to destroy her works." This conflict is reflected in NS and LS and especially in SS when the narrator worries over the intentions of the Mother. This is also the Jesus parallel that Mantis was searching for long long ago regarding Severian's execution of Prefect Priscia in UotNS.
6. Typhon. In KJ Herod seeks to reestablish the worship of the sun god Set-Typhon. In addition one of Jesus' marks of true kingship is a typhonic or red beard. This ties Typhon in NS and LS to both the red sun, which Severian the New Sun vanquishes, and to Herod. To further bolster this, Silk is described as having a reddish gold beard.

7.Graves says somewhere in the book that the sun god gives birth to himself.

8. And last, at the end of King Jesus/Short Sun Jesus/Silkhorn departs in a ship with Mary the mother/Maytera Marble, Mary the wife of Jesus/Nettle, and Mary the Hairdresser/Seawrack who is the servant of the Goddess/Mother. Note also the Arthurian parallel.

I hope that I am not rambling incoherently but I find my discovery very exciting. It's given rise to some tenuous theories that I will post in Part two so as not to make this too long. Thanks for bearing with me. D.D.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 12 Nov 2002, 18:11 · follows Don Doggett

Don:

First, let me second Roy C's words of welcome and express pleasure in reading your interesting and articulate first posts.

... I had just finished my second reading of TBotNS when I came across a book I had never heard of before: King Jesus by Robert Graves. I immediately bought it and read it. To me it was a revelation, not just because it's an incredible and heretical work of art, but because there are so many themes in it that echo through NS, LS, and SS. In some ways (imho, of course) NS is a reworking of Graves' work (why had I never heard of this book before?).

OK; here's my primary point of contention. I do not think it reasonable to suppose that NS is a reworking of King Jesus, because Graves's world view is utterly at odds with Wolfe's. Graves is, as you note, "heretical*" while Wolfe is a believing and practicing Catholic Christian**. As such, he may write novels which are not _explicitly_ Christian, or even novels (such as the "Soldier" books or THERE ARE DOORS) which take non-Christian deities as their givens; but even these will have at their base the worldview of Catholicism

-- a worldview which is Christian in some very specific ways: it emphasizes the importance and value of the material/sensible world; it is extremely sacramental and formal, at times almost legalistic; and, more than any other Christian body, it places huge value on what Charles Williams called the "economy of exchange" -- bearing one another's burdens, praying for one another, praying to/with/for the departed-in-Christ. We may expect to find, and we do find, traces of all this throughout Wolfe's work.

* Actually, that word doesn't really apply, because heresy is dangerously false belief within the context of a religious community; as a non-member of a Christian community Graves could not be a Christian heretic. The technical term of condemnation, if you want one, would be "infidel," one who does not believe. 8*)

**Some people (on this list and elsewhere) seem to find this fact irritating and try to ignore it when interpreting Wolfe's work. To my mind, this is like trying to interpret, say, the novels of Jean-Paul Sartre without taking existentialism into account.

Given that, Graves' thesis in KING JESUS is going to be fundamentally alien to Wolfe's worldview. He may (for all I know) value KING JESUS as a work of art. But if there is any sense in which NS is a "reworking" of KJ, it would have to be an extremely radical one, it would have to be a reworking which takes some of Graves' material and wrenches it back into a context in which there is only one true God, in which Jesus is not a merely-human agent but the actual and unique incarnation of that God, in which Jesus had not come to "destroy the works" of the female but to save humanity from sin and death.

(In fairness to your thesis: Yes, there is a streak in Wolfe's work which trends that way -- a streak which can uncharitably be called misogynistic, or more charitably the failure of an older man to shuck off certain negative values of the culture in which he was raised.)

But Severian Narrator does not serve primarily to "destroy the works" of the Female -- nor do Silk or the Narrator. All of them serve primarily as liberators of their people from various kinds and consequences of sin. Severian, the New Sun, liberates the people of Urth (at a terrible cost) from the slow death which results from their behavior when they were imperial masters of space. If there is a single figure which represents this sin, it is not a woman, but Typhon.

(Silk may be a "christ figure" but he is at least as much a figure of Moses. As such, he is a prophet who leads his people forth from "that iron foundry, Egypt" -- or, dragging forth the requisite Gnostic allusion, Philip K. Dick's "black iron prison" -- but is not permitted to enter the Promised Land himself. And the Narrator is a much more complex and ambiguous figure, whose meaning I believe we are only beginning to tease out, after the initial, somewhat hostile, reaction to the ending of SS.)

The real problem is that you've made a lot of surface connections, but I don't see a smoking gun, as it were

-- that is, something which uniquely and unambiguously ties NS to KJ, something which points directly at KJ and no other work as something which Wolfe is using as a model. This kind of surface connection can be found between almost any two rich and complex works of narrative literature; I'm not going to proceed through the exercise, but I believe one could find similar connections between NS and, say, OLIVER TWIST, or PILGRIM'S PROGRESS.

1. This is the obvious one. Severian's lameness and the wound on his face. This applies to Silk as well (at least the limp) but this has been discussed before so I'll move on.

Well, that is an image that is found all over literature; some of the most obvious referents include the wounded Fisher-King of the Wasteland (in the Grail cycle), Tamurlane, and, if I recall correctly, Marcus Aurelius (whom I have never studied myself so I'm spouting my memory of others' posts on this subject).

2. This one is marginal but interesting. Dorcas appears in KJ as the playmate of the boy Jesus. While they are playing "Noah's Ark" she becomes frightened and runs away. It's on p.166 and it reads like Dorcas and Severian's relationship writ small.

Actually, this is straining for a connection whose explanation is much simpler ... Humans of the Commonwealth (as Wolfe has made clear) all have the names of Christian saints. Dorcas is named for the woman Peter raises from the dead in Acts chapter 9, vv 36-41, -- who is also (rather confusingly) called Tabitha. The resonance with Dorcas in NS being raised from the lake of the dead by Severian and/or the Claw leaves, I think, no reasonable room for doubt.

Could Wolfe also be referring to Graves' Dorcas? Of course; but lacking a smoking gun

connection, I don't see it.

3. Jesus in KJ is a product of the manipulation of bloodlines by devotees of the triple goddess with the goal of creating the second Adam.

Now, see, this is exactly the sort of thing I expect Wolfe would reject utterly. Jesus for a Christian is the end product of a carefully preserved blood line, but not one manipulated by humans for any such purpose. (But now you have me wondering about Frank Herbert and the Bene Gesserit!)

He is also the grandson of King Herod.

We know with reasonable certainty who Severian's maternal grandparents are. For the paternal line, well, Wolfe deliberately keeps that mysterious and, though many speculations have been offered, none has really proven satisfactory. I suggest that the mystery is deliberate, and intended to reflect the orthodox Christian belief that Jesus had no human father.

Simon son of Boethus to Herod Antipater (Jesus' father): "What if this latest millennium should close with the appearance of a King who combines all the qualities of his predecessors: true born like Adam, sinless like Enoch, faithful like Abraham, wise like Solomon?" p.64 Malrubius to Severian in Citadel: "In you all the divergent tendencies of our race may have achieved synthesis."

I think it a little difficult to see Severian as trueborn, and quite difficult to see him as sinless or faithful. (Wise is a whole nother question.)

4. Severian's multiplicity of personalities has it's echo as well: "But Apollo, who contains within himself the shades of numerous gods and demons is now the sole master of Delphi."

I'm really not clear on the relevance of Apollo to Severian.

[Graves has Jesus say:] "...I am released from the jurisdiction of the Female; I have come to destroy her works." This conflict is reflected in NS

How, precisely?

and LS and especially in SS when the narrator worries over the intentions of the Mother. This is also the Jesus parallel that Mantis was searching for long long ago regarding Severian's execution of Prefect Priscia in UotNS.

This is probably your single best argument, in that it does explain something new in a satisfactory manner... but, I don't know.

6. Typhon. In KJ Herod seeks to reestablish the worship of the sun god Set-Typhon. In addition one of Jesus' marks of true kingship is a typhonic or red beard. This ties Typhon in NS and LS to both the red sun, which Severian the New Sun vanquishes, and to Herod. To further bolster this, Silk is described as having a reddish gold beard.

A connection like this between Herod and Typhon is very cool, but ... well, so what? Typhon's primary "function" in the Christ-walk of Severian is as Satan tempting him in the desert.

(Incidentally, this definition of "typhonic" does not appear in any dictionary I have been able to look in, though I admit that I have not currently got access to an OED. The only definition I could find was, basically, of or pertaining to typhoons. I suspect Graves was referring to something

but I don't know what.)

7.Graves says somewhere in the book that the sun god gives birth to himself.

That would be pure Egyptian mythology. But Severian, well, doesn't.

8. And last, at the end of King Jesus/Short Sun Jesus/Silkhorn departs in a ship with Mary the mother/Maytera Marble, Mary the wife of Jesus/Nettle, and Mary the Hairdresser/Seawrack who is the servant of the Goddess/Mother. Note also the Arthurian parallel.

The Arthurian parallel, yes. The other ... well, since the Arthurian thing is so clear, we're once again short a smoking gun.

Okay, some quick comments on Part Two.

Typhon is not Severian's father. I believe that Ymar is. More correctly, Ymar is the original Severian [...]

Umm, no. The original Severian is Severian. The wanderers up and down the Corridors of Time have made ... adjustments ... to Severian's life. He is a revised edition.

I believe the mausoleum where Severian played is Ymar's.

Actually, I think it's Scylla's, isn't it?

One parallel that I forgot to mention between Graves' Jesus and Severian and Silk is that none of them are truly divine.

But Wolfe's Jesus is ... which is, semi-paradoxically, _why_ Severian isn't.

Jerry Friedman — 16 Nov 2002, 00:04 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

--- Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <ddanehy at siebel.com> wrote:
Don:

...> > 8. And last, at the end of King Jesus/Short Sun

Jesus/Silkhorn departs in a ship with Mary the mother/Maytera Marble, Mary the wife of Jesus/Nettle, and Mary the Hairdresser/Seawrack who is the servant of the Goddess/Mother. Note also the Arthurian parallel.

The Arthurian parallel, yes. The other ... well, since the Arthurian thing is so clear, we're once again short a smoking gun.

To me, this is Don's "smoking-est gun". It's extremely bizarre that Silk "sails" away with Horn's wife and mistress, but according to Don, King Jesus sails away with his wife and a former prostitute. (Does Graves' Jesus have sex with Mary the Hairdresser?) Considering the parallels Don notes, the correspondence here is far better than that with Arthur's half-sister Morgan Le Fay, the Queen of the Wasteland, and the Queen of Norgales, as in Malory. (Unless there's a version of the Arthur legend where the three queens are Igraine, Guenevere, and Morgause?)

Jerry Friedman