

the great god Pan

The Urth list — 6 messages, 6 voices, 24 Jan 2003

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Russell Wodell — 24 Jan 2003, 01:13

As I recall (dimly), Plutarch said a sailor heard a voice from a distant island commanding him to proclaim that "The great god Pan is dead!" Since Pan's name literally means "All," I had always assumed that this was supposed to be a coded message that the entire Greek pantheon of gods were dead - i.e., that the Christian era was coming. In *Soldier in the Mist* the lamia complains that Io has dropped her chains into the snake's hole, that supernatural beings dislike iron, and that "The reason is to come." Again, dimly do I recall that faeries were supposed to shun iron because of the significance of the nails holding Christ to the cross. This raises the wider question of Wolfe's ambiguous and often quite terrifying presentation of the Greek deities. I think we are to view them as actual gods, not just Latro's hallucinations, but Wolfe says in one interview that they were "not worthy of being worshipped." Would that make them demons? What is the orthodox Catholic position these days on rival religions and their supernatural beings? Certainly the underlying logic of the Latro novels thus far is the move from Earth-worship to Father-worship, and as usual in Wolfe all the major evil characters are either female (or in one case) become female. (Not that he's totally misogynistic: the Amazons are portrayed entirely positively, and Io the slave girl is the brightest and best of all his characters.)

Chris — 24 Jan 2003, 01:38 · follows Russell Wodell

The bit about iron is interesting- while I'd heard that the sidhe had a problem with iron, I never knew there was an underlying reason behind it. Are there any other sources that might explain the significance of iron, and whether it was referred to before the Christian Era or not?

I do think that sometimes too much is made of Wolfe's Catholicism, as I think has been mentioned here before. And jamming this story into an "orthodox" Catholic framework is likely to be an uncomfortable fit.

I never felt, reading the stories, that any of the goddesses were purely evil, though certainly inhuman and for the most part cruel. I doubt any of the male gods would behave any better when push came to shove. I don't think it's misogynistic - I really think the most villainous characters in this story were male, actually, though they knew how to put a good face on it.

That said, the bit about Io... she's a bright character, but that is at least in part because Latro cares about her and portrays her positively. Despite that, there are some things to be uncomfortable about- and I suspect that Latro's deep (mysterious) depression had a bit to do with the way she changed the nature of their relationship to protect herself, among other things. He may not have remembered any better, but I suspect he'd have still felt like something was wrong there.

Chris

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James Jordan — 24 Jan 2003, 02:24 · follows Chris

Russell rote:

This raises the wider question of Wolfe's ambiguous and often quite terrifying presentation of the Greek deities.

A whole lot of what we are brought up on about ancient Greek and Roman religion has been cleaned up. You never hear about the human sacrifices offered before important battles, so that human entrails could be read. Stories about the gods have often been cleaned up too. In reality, they were a pretty frightening bunch, which is why they had to be appeased and bought-off all the time. Happily, modern scholarship seems much more open about such matters, not writing books for children and for 19th c. prudes.

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Probably. Fallen angels.

What is the orthodox Catholic position these days on rival religions and their supernatural beings?

I think Wolfe would agree that when Adam gave the world to Satan, and put his posterity under Satan (though he probably does not take the story literally), he gave the world and humanity over to the demonic realm. He is clearly "conservative" on the general matter, anyway, since he does not demythologize demons and "gods" into "aspects of human consciousness" or some such thing.

I don't know that Wolfe would say, "There was a demon named Athena, and another named Baal." But I think he would say that demons did occasionally interact with people, who then concocted names and stories about them.

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evil characters are either female (or in one case) become female. (Not that he's totally misogynistic: the Amazons are portrayed entirely positively, and the slave girl is the brightest and best of all his characters.)

I think that's right. Latro is on his way to some kind of contact with Israel -- which doubtless will be muted and concealed in the text, providing Wolfe lives to write it. The evil female characters have to do with worshipping the creature (earth) rather than the creator (God). Wolfe shows us where he thinks such an orientation leads, to cruelty and horror.

Nutria

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 24 Jan 2003, 17:09 · follows James Jordan

Russell then Nutria wrote:

I think we are to view them as actual gods, not just Latro's hallucinations,

I think rather "actual 'supernatural' beings," though not necessarily gods. -- I put the word "supernatural" in quotes because I believe, and I believe that Wolfe either believes or, at least, takes as a given for his fictions, that the word "supernatural" implies a false (possibly a Manicheistic) division. The only "supernatural" being, by this understanding, is God; the rest are all creatures, and, as such, bounded, delimited as it were, by the rules of their making. These rules may not be exactly the same from one type of being to another, of course, but all creatures exist within some such bounds. The point here: beings like the "gods" of the *Soldier* books, or of the *Short/Long Sun* books, are much (infinitely) more like us than they are like the one supernatural Being.

but Wolfe says in one interview that they were "not worthy of being worshipped." Would that make them demons?

Probably. Fallen angels.

Not necessarily ... demons are not the only creatures "not worthy of being worshipped." There are, for example, you and me and the rest of the human race. Non-fallen angels, also, are not worthy of being worshipped. In point of fact, from the Catholic, or merely Christian, point of view, all creatures have this in common ...

... but creatures mistakenly worshipped are not necessarily fallen angels. Wandering back to that C**F** discussion, I hurry to point out that both Tolkien and Lewis give examples in their fictions of how beings may be taken for gods and still be under the Obedience -- indeed, that being taken for gods may be an aspect of their obedience. (The clearest example is the wizard on the island of the Dufflepuds, in *THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER*.)

And, too, there is Wolfe's interesting dictum that what pretends to be a god tends to become the god ... to which end I point to Lewis again; his last, and possibly best, novel, *TILL WE HAVE FACES*, makes use of the Greek Psyche -- himself disguised as a local god -- as a disguise or mask for the one God. (Well, sort of ... that's at least one well-worn interpretation ...)

What is the orthodox Catholic position these days on rival religions and their supernatural beings?

...deleting James' response...

As far as I've been able to tell (and this means, among other things, having searched the Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], a more-or-less complete document of What Catholics Are Expected To Believe), there is no officially orthodox position on this matter ... which would

mean that a Catholic is at liberty to believe what s/he chooses,
provided it doesn't contradict any of the things a Catholic _is_ expected to believe.

A great deal of Catholic ink has been spilled over the years concerning the idea that pagan religions are best understood as a "preparation" for the Gospel (as, indeed, is the Jewish Law); for example, this is referred to in CCC at #843. The exact mechanism by which this "preparation" is performed, however, is left open -- and can mean anything from a natural tendency of the human mind towards God (CCC #781) to purely speculative and para-orthodox ideas about God using angels, or even demons, to plant religious ideas and thus to prepare peoples for the Gospel.

Jeff Wilson — 25 Jan 2003, 08:18 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

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

Certainly the
underlying logic of the Latro novels thus far is the move from
Earth-worship to Father-worship, and as usual in Wolfe all the major
evil characters are either female (or in one case) become female.

=All= as usual? Is there something we don't know about Typhon or Baldanders?

Jeff Wilson
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"If your SecOp can see you, so can the enemy." -Cpt Law

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Michael Straight — 26 Jan 2003, 00:58 · follows Jeff Wilson

On Sat, 25 Jan 2003, Jeff Wilson wrote:
Earth-worship to Father-worship, and as usual in Wolfe all the major
evil characters are either female (or in one case) become female.

=All= as usual? Is there something we don't know about Typhon or Baldanders?

Or Musk? Or Lemur?

And even in Latro, I'd say the Spartan leaders are **the** major evil characters.

-Rostrum