

I Claudius

The Urth list — 11 messages, 6 voices, 07 Sep 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4714>

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Russell Wodell — 07 Sep 2006, 00:19

Graves' Claudius novels seem an obvious inspiration for BOTNS.

But I wonder if there isn't an intervening source in a Graves rip-off: A.E. van Vogt's fix-up *Empire of the Sun* (1957). I'm relying on childhood memories here (has anyone read this recently?) but I remember it as chock-full of the surreal pulp imagery that Wolfe loves to rationalize, in this case people fighting with swords and ray-guns in a medieval-seeming setting that included spaceships. The last sentence of Chapter One of *Shadow* particularly struck me as reminiscent of the van Vogt ("It was in this fashion that I began the long journey by which I have backed into the throne") which recapitulates (againk, as I recall...) the basic Claudius plot of the least likely man becoming Emperor.

In much the same way, the opening sentence of *Shadow* ("It is possible I already had some presentiment of my future") strongly calls to mind both Proust and Dickens, two of Wolfe's culture heroes. Particularly the Dickens of *David Copperfield*: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." How true of Severian!

Russell Wodell

Andy Robertson — 07 Sep 2006, 07:49 · in reply to Russell Wodell

Russell Wodell writes:

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EMPIRE OF THE ATOM. Gorgeous tripe from AEVV, but having read it recently I doubt there's a close link: the style is all wrong, and VV is really writing about the pains of being a superhuman/subhuman mutant.

Jesper Svedberg — 07 Sep 2006, 14:47 · in reply to Andy Robertson

Andy Robertson skrev:

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I read Van Vogt's *The Book of Ptath* a few years back, and it struck me as very similar to *BotNS*, both in its mixture of far future sf and mythical elements and in its voice (of course, Van Vogt isn't as good a writer as Wolfe, but I think he's better than his reputation and better than many of his more famous contemporaries). I haven't read anything else by Van Vogt, so I don't know how similar *Ptath* is to his other works, but I felt that Wolfe seems to echo many of the concepts in this book, and since it almost was a dying earth it really felt like a potential source for inspiration for Wolfe. (And even if *Ptath* isn't an inspiration it would seem likely that Wolfe read a lot of Van Vogt when he was young, since Van Vogt was a huge name back then.)

// Jesper

Andy Robertson — 07 Sep 2006, 18:03 · in reply to Jesper Svedberg

Jesper Svedberg writes:

Andy Robertson skrev:

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I'd be astonished if Wolfe had not read Van Vogt. I cannot say if any of VV's work was an inspiration to Wolfe, but I think that merely setting it in the distant future is not enough.

TBOTNS is a "Dying Earth" story - a story set in a future in which the Sun (and therefore creation itself) has become senile, and reality frays.

This theme descends (like all SF does, I believe) from ancient Indo-European religious and cultural forms, in this case the idea that the Universe is cyclically renewed through flood and flame.

VV, as far as I know, never wrote in this vein. In fact VV was really writing, and wrote again and again (to the point of wearying at least this reader), about quite another ancient Indo-European theme - the idea that a man can effectively become a god.

hartshorn

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Jesper Svedberg — 07 Sep 2006, 18:56 · in reply to Andy Robertson

Andy Robertson skrev:

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The Book of Ptath is set in a far future earth (it has also been published under the title _Two Hundred Million A.D._) where civilization has regressed, much like it has done in Vance's Dying Earth and Wolfe's Urth. It isn't an obvious Dying Earth setting like these two (The Sun is for instance not in danger of going out IIRC), but it does share a number of features and the general feeling of the world isn't a million miles away. (Some further research shows that _The Encyclopedia of Fantasy_ actually calls it an early example of a Dying Earth.)

I do think though that theme of godhood that was there on _Ptath_ (and that you say is common to most work of Van Vogt's) is something that Wolfe grapples with in BotNS. Severian isn't really a godlike figure, but his story does echo that of _the Book of Ptath_ and many similar stories of mythological origin.

I'm not saying it's an obvious source for inspiration, but I think it does deserve a closer look before it's discarded.

// Jesper

Andy Robertson — 07 Sep 2006, 22:18 · in reply to Jesper Svedberg

Jesper Svedberg writes:

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It certainly is worth looking at. ((My pronouncements have been unjustifiably gnomish and absolute. You must excuse me - I'm terribly busy.)) But I think the difference lies in the fact that the "godhood" in TBOTNS is rooted in Judaeo-Christian ideas of submission to an omnipotent Increate and His judgement. This idea of God is not an Indo-European concept at all and is really quite different from the godhood in PTATH or elsewhere in VV.

My 2p, in haste. I'd be interested to know if Wolfe has spoken about any debt to VV.

hartshorn

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Jesper Svedberg — 07 Sep 2006, 22:38 · in reply to Andy Robertson

Andy Robertson skrev:

It certainly is worth looking at. ((My pronouncements have been unjustifiably gnostic and absolute. You must excuse me - I'm terribly busy.)) But I think the difference lies in the fact that the "godhood" in TBOTNS is rooted in Judaeo-Christian ideas of submission to an omnipotent Increate and His judgement. This idea of God is not an Indo-European concept at all and is really quite different from the godhood in PTATH or elsewhere in VV.

Well, right. I'm just suggesting that Wolfe might be reworking a Van Vogtian (or similar) story of dawning Godhood in a Judaeo-Christian context. In other words: he's asking the question "What would the type of hero found in a Campbellian monomyth or a story by Van Vogt be like if the actual metaphysics of the world were based on christianity?"

// Jesper

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 08 Sep 2006, 01:53 · in reply to Jesper Svedberg

On 9/7/06, Jesper Svedberg <jsvedberg@gmail.com> wrote:
(of course, Van Vogt isn't as good a writer as Wolfe, but I think he's better than his reputation and better than many of his more famous contemporaries).

He was a half-good writer. On the level of sentences, his writing was probably better than Asimov's, maybe even Heinlein's, but not up to Simak's or Merrill's. But his plotting was atrocious, and his characters ... welllllll, they're about as deep and well-rounded as Clarke's, but (unlike Clarke) he depended on character to propel his story, which only adds to the jerryrigged plotting.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

I've got a piece of braaaaaain lodge in me heeead!!!

Jeff Wilson — 08 Sep 2006, 05:32 · in reply to Andy Robertson

Andy Robertson wrote:

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man can effectively become a god.

VV's novel, THE UNIVERSE MAKER, combines the two themes (as you can probably guess from the title), as well as the Wolfean theme of an emergent, higher ethical order emerging from an indefinite cycle of recapitulation and attempting to control it.

Jeff

David Duffy — 08 Sep 2006, 22:13 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On Fri, 8 Sep 2006, Jeff Wilson wrote:

Andy Robertson wrote:

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I've previously commented that I think there are images/ideas from Van Vogt, but in Short Sun, notably Venus/Earth, transmigration one way/rocket the other in _Null_A_. They are immediately subverted, but the descriptions of the trees of Venus really struck me when I was rereading it recently.

I find reading Van Vogt a guilty pleasure (the earlier the better). If anyone hasn't read him, I would suggest the short stories. I like the fixup The War against the Rull -- you get "the old, perennial thrill...a feeling of exaltation in contemplating this universe of fabulous planets and of wondrous stars...", as well as "Dark forest of Mira, he thought shakily. Alive with the young of the lymph beast..." ;) [a better model for that movie].

David Duffy.

Andy Robertson — 08 Sep 2006, 23:10 · in reply to David Duffy

David Duffy writes:

I find reading Van Vogt a guilty pleasure (the earlier the better).

He wrote a handful of archetypically beautiful stories

The Enchanted Village

Dormant

The Monster

The Sound

GUilty? No. You are perceiving (ragged) beauty.