

Bringin' it back to Wolfe by the long road

The Urth list — 13 messages, 8 voices, 17 Apr 2007

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don doggett — 17 Apr 2007, 07:29

First things first.

from The Letters of JRR Tolkien, 1981 hardcover, p. 144, letter 131 to Milton Waldman:

'But an equally basic passion of mine "ab initio" was for myth (not allegory!) and for fairy-story, and above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history, of which there is far too little in the world (accessible to me) for my appetite. . . Also - and here I hope I shall not sound absurd - I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff. . . But once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story - the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths - which I could dedicate simply to England; to my country.'

Of course, he didn't manage this in his lifetime, and had actually despaired of it by this letter, but I believe my point is made. The Silmarillion and The Children of Hurin are the results of his son's effort to bring this ambition to fruit. This letter is huge, but it's the most interesting one of the bunch, in my opinion.

Now to Wolfe, sort of. In the middle of this lengthy quote there is a passage on Arthur:

'Of course there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to

be missing. For one thing its 'faerie' is too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive. For another and more important thing: it is involved in, and explicitly contains the Christian religion.'

I find this paragraph interesting in that Tolkien views Christianity as a liability here. And he's right regarding his own work, the lack of overt Christianity is a definite strength. But what does everyone think regarding Wolfe's big novels? I'm thinking especially of Wizard Knight, which involves both Arthur and the most overt references to Christianity I have encountered from Wolfe. I found it a weakness myself; having Odin (the Vallfather) bow down to Michael was a little close to proselytising for me, and it seemed unnecessary to the overall intentions of the story. Opinions?

Also, one other minor thing. Tolkien writes, in a footnote to this letter (Yes, virginia, he seems to have written footnotes. Anyone know if this is common in letters?) that he is a huge fan of Mary Renault, that he loves the two books on Theseus, The King Must Die and Bull from the Sea, and that her letter to him was one of his favorite bits of fan mail. I read somewhere around this list that Wolfe found Mary Renault unreadable but that he thought Robert Graves' Hercules My Shipmate was great (it is). Graves, of course, took a fairly nasty snipe at Tolkien's work. In this one I have to side with Tolkien. The King Must Die is pretty damn great.

yours in wordage

Don

brunians at brunians.org — 17 Apr 2007, 07:38 · in reply to don doggett

Also, one other minor thing. Tolkien writes, in a footnote to this letter (Yes, virginia, he seems to have written footnotes. Anyone know if this is common in letters?)

I do it all the time. I don't write many letters, but I can't think of a one that has not had at least one footnote.

that he is a huge fan of Mary Renault, that he loves the two books on Theseus, The King Must Die and Bull from the Sea, and that her letter to him was one of his favorite bits of fan mail. I read somewhere around this list that Wolfe found Mary Renault unreadable

Huh. He also finds Delany unreadable (or was it just Dhalgren?). What do Delany and Renault have in common?

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Hercules My Shipmate was great (it is).

Indeed.

Graves, of
course, took a fairly nasty snipe at Tolkien's work.
In this one I have to side with Tolkien. The King Must
Die is pretty damn great.

Yes in fact. Mary Renault is awesome. All of her stuff.

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Andy Robertson — 17 Apr 2007, 07:47 · in reply to don doggett

don doggett writes:

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of Wizard Knight, which involves both Arthur and the
most overt references to Christianity I have
encountered from Wolfe. I found it a weakness myself;
having Odin (the Valfather) bow down to Michael was a
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Not really. Michael here is not precisely a Christian figure in a christian universe: rather he's a being of a certain rank, in a non-Christian universe, who is explained/derived in terms of Christian myth much as the Overcyns are explained/derived in terms of Nordic myth. He is of higher rank than Odin but other beings of non-Christian derivation like Parka are of higher rank than him,. There is no Christ in Mythgarthyr - the Outsider was far more explicitly Christian in his function and relationship to humanity.

- hartshorn

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James Wynn — 17 Apr 2007, 12:41 · in reply to Andy Robertson

don doggett writes:

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of Wizard Knight, which involves both Arthur and the
most overt references to Christianity I have
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Hartshorn replies:

Not really. Michael here is not precisely a Christian figure in a christian universe: rather he's a being of a certain rank, in a non-Christian universe, who is explained/derived in terms of Christian myth much as the Overcyns are explained/derived in terms of Nordic myth. He is of higher rank than Odin but other beings of non-Christian derivation like Parka are of higher rank than him,.

Granting that Parka is of the same level as Michael, I think it is a significant point of which Wolfe was aware that in Germany the temples of Woden were overbuilt with chapels dedicated to St. Michael. (heh heh why do you suppose that is?)

Of course, Able himself is a pretty blatant Christ-figure although, of course, not to the extent Narnia's Aslan is.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 17 Apr 2007, 15:43 · in reply to Andy Robertson

On 4/17/07, Andy Robertson <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk> wrote:
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I must disagree. This *is* a Christian universe -- or, rather, a Universe created by the Christian God. Much of Wolfe's work involves what I suppose you could call "baptising" non-Christian (or, in the case of _Long Sun_, Christian-but-heretical) worldviews, embedding them into a more-or-less explicitly Christian context.

Long Sun, as I have argued at length elsewhere, is a quite overt baptism of a Gnostic (specifically, Valentinian) creation, embedding the Whorl, a creation fo the evil Demiurge (Pas), _into_ the "real" creation of Christian belief. The "Latro" books seem to baptize the gods of Greece, Egypt, and the ancient Middle-east, portraying them as creations of the one God, more powerful than humans but still creatures. And WK seems to baptize the "worlds" of the Eddas.

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

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

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

Soon, where Toon Town once stood will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food. Tire salons, automobile dealerships and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see. My God, it'll be beautiful.

brunians at brunians.org — 17 Apr 2007, 16:51 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

The "Latro" books seem to baptize the gods of Greece, Egypt, and the ancient Middle-east, portraying them as creations of the one God, more powerful than humans but still creatures.

That's a fairly standard view, in Greek religion and in 'heathen' or 'pagan' religions generally. There is one God, normally sort of distant, who creates subordinate gods.

As an aside, in India, Vaishnavism (for example) is strictly monotheistic (Krishna being the One God), with all of the other gods either being aspects of Krishna or 'demi-gods' (basically angels). Vaishnavism also has the concept of salvation, which is not actually all that common in religious thought. This has led a lot of people to speculate (along with the striking similarities between the names Krishna and Christos) that Vaishnavism antedates the introduction of Christianity to India, but that seems not to be the case: it was well developed several hundred years BC.

The easiest answer (for me: atheists might find it more difficult) is that God has done the

incarnation thingie numerous times. You can even fit this into an orthodox Christian worldview (sort of) by insisting that Christ is the original and pattern of all of these avatars. It just requires an extra time dimension, and there do seem to be several timelike dimensions (in my personal experience, anyway).

I had really hoped that Gene would get Latro to India, and maybe it will happen. I'm less enthusiastic than I was for lots of Latro books after reading Sidon, which was good, but not the same as the first two.

I think I will just sit back and enjoy what the man chooses to write.

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don doggett — 17 Apr 2007, 17:48 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

--- Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

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or, rather, a Universe
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involves what I
suppose you could call "baptising" non-Christian
(or, in the case of
Long Sun, Christian-but-heretical) worldviews,
embedding them into
a more-or-less explicitly Christian context.

Ok, so assuming this, is it a liability to the text as
Tolkien said Christianity was to Arthurian legend?

Don

Andy Robertson — 17 Apr 2007, 18:15 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes writes:

I must disagree. This *is* a Christian universe

Only in the same limited sense that Middle-Earth is "Christian."

There is no Christ, no Theoanthropos.

Yes, I agree with your other points (indeed I've probably made most of them myself somewhere
in the archives) but this is the only really meaningful definition of "Christian."

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don doggett — 17 Apr 2007, 18:35 · in reply to Andy Robertson

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

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Yes, I agree with your other points (indeed I've probably made most of them myself somewhere in the archives) but this is the only really meaningful definition of "Christian."

Except that an argument can be made that Able is the Christ figure. Or Severian. Or Silk. Or Latro. That at least gives it an overtly Christian template. Tolkien's world doesn't possess this, only vaguely Judeo Christian values presented as a sort of Natural Law.

Don

James B. Jordan — 17 Apr 2007, 18:43 · in reply to Andy Robertson

At 01:15 PM 4/17/2007, you wrote:
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I suppose one must grant Tolkein what he's doing: presenting a pre-Christian world, indeed pre-Abrahamic. Hence, no Christ . . . yet. No Sabbath Day formal worship . . . yet. Similarly, Wolfe in the Latro series. For the rest of Wolfe's works, however, the setting is Anno Domini (as he'd surely prefer to put it), and hence the "Christ-event" is somewhere in the past.

FWIW

Nutria (I've been away. Have we dispensed with animal names?)

James B. Jordan
Director, Biblical Horizons
Box 1096
Niceville, FL 32588
<http://www.biblicalhorizons.com>

Alan Lewis — 18 Apr 2007, 01:17 · in reply to don doggett

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Judeo Christian values presented as a sort of Natural Law.

Don

Okay, I'm not as die-hard a Tolkien scholar as some here seem to be, but turnabout is fair play with this point. I would plausit an equally valid argument could be made for any of the main heroes from LOTR for a Christ figure for that matter. Gandolph sacrifices himself for his friends and comes back from the dead. Frodo bears the burden of carrying the ring to save the world, and 'dies' and comes back on the wings of eagles. Aragorn travels through the land of the dead and harrows hell. All loosely speaking of course, but these people all seemed Christ-like to me in the exact same way that Able, Severian, and Silk did. I'd be curious to have Don expound on how Latro is.

Alan

don doggett — 18 Apr 2007, 02:32 · in reply to Alan Lewis

--- Alan Lewis <alanarc1 at optonline.net> wrote:
I'd be

curious to have Don expound
on how Latro is.

Ok. Latro is a god as man, neither wholly human nor wholly divine, as he is possessed by Ares in Soldier of Arete. He also dies and returns to life in Soldier of Sidon. Which is something I've been meaning to bring up. I think it was pretty clever of Wolfe to admit that Latro has multiple personalities in him then muddy it up with Egyptian religion by saying the soul is divided into 8 parts.

Don

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=178109961>

Stanislaus — 18 Apr 2007, 19:34 · in reply to Andy Robertson

Hello Andy,

Tuesday, April 17, 2007, 9:47:12 AM, you wrote:

don doggett writes:

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of Wizard Knight, which involves both Arthur and the

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encountered from Wolfe. I found it a weakness myself;

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was far more explicitly Christian in his function and relationship to humanity.

- hartshorn

Wizard-Knight is clearly Neoplatonic. But Neoplatonism was christened by Pseudo-Dionysius and is the basis of eg Thomist philosophy.

Best regards,
Stanislaus [mailto:sbocian at poczta.fm](mailto:sbocian@poczta.fm)

On wie jak zyska?, a nie straci?.
Wideofelietony Tadeusza Mosza. Zobacz >> <http://link.interia.pl/f1a3c>