

# "Principles of governance" Gene Wolfe's Politics

The Urth list — 17 messages, 11 voices, 02 Apr 2009

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5390>

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Son of Witz — 02 Apr 2009, 17:29

refresher quote, questions below:

SHADOW XXXII Five Legs:

.....

"Severian. Name for me the seven principles of governance."

It was an effort for me to speak, but I managed (in my dream, if it was a dream) to say, "I do not recall that we have studied such a thing, Master."

"You were always the most careless of my boys," he told me, and fell silent.

A foreboding grew on me; I sensed that if I did not reply, some tragedy would occur. At last I began weakly, "Anarchy . . ."

"That is not governance, but the lack of it. I taught you that it precedes all governance. Now list the seven sorts."

"Attachment to the person of the monarch. Attachment to a bloodline or other sequence of succession. Attachment to the royal state. Attachment to a code legitimizing the governing state. Attachment to the law only. Attachment to a greater or lesser board of electors, as framers of the law. Attachment to an abstraction conceived as including the body of electors, other bodies giving rise to them, and numerous other elements, largely ideal."

"Tolerable. Of these, which is the earliest form, and which the highest?"

"The development is in the order given, Master," I said. "But I do not recall that you ever asked before which was highest?"

Master Malrubius leaned forward, his eyes burning brighter than the coals of the fire. "Which is highest, Severian?"

"The last, Master?"

"You mean attachment to an abstraction conceived as including the body of electors, other bodies giving rise to them, and numerous other elements, largely ideal?"

"Yes, Master."

"Of what kind, Severian, is your own attachment to the Divine Entity?"

I said nothing. It may have been that I was thinking; but if so, my mind was too much filled with sleep to be conscious of its thought. Instead, I became profoundly aware of my physical surroundings. The sky above my face in all its grandeur seemed to have been made solely for my benefit, and to be presented for my inspection now. I lay upon the ground as upon a woman, and the very air that surrounded me seemed a thing as admirable as crystal and as fluid as wine.

"Answer me, Severian."

"The first, if I have any."

"To the person of the monarch?"

"Yes, because there is no succession."

"The animal that rests beside you now would die for you. Of what kind is his attachment to you?"

"The first?"

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ok, is the last one meant to be a joke about our current situation? Abstraction, largely ideal.

maybe some conservatives can help me out here.

"Attachment to the person of the monarch"

On one hand, I don't understand how "Attachment to" is governance. Are the people attached, or is the governance attached?

Another question this brings up for me. This notion of a Divine Ruler...

You get it in the Grail myths, and I suppose in the Jesus Myth, this idea of bringing back the Divine King. I'm not sure if that's right, but it's something that seems to come up in various traditions. Anyway, While anyone could sort of get behind letting God's Vicar rule, if it could be proven. Yet we've had plenty of crappy rulers claiming God's mandate.

anyway, How can this idea of a Monarch that is the best system jibe with reality lacking an unambiguous 'seal of approval' from God?

Let me rephrase? This seems like a sort of religious right position (maybe I'm totally wrong) So, would anyone toss away democracy in favor of a monarch? How can this notion not be "largely ideal" when it hinges upon the character of a single person?

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just asking...

~Witz

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John Watkins — 02 Apr 2009, 17:41 · in reply to Son of Witz

On Thu, Apr 2, 2009 at 1:29 PM, Son of Witz <sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org> wrote:  
refresher quote, questions below:

ok, is the last one meant to be a joke about our current situation?  
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I think so. The idea is that attachment to abstract principles is higher than loyalty to any particular laws or men.

"Attachment to the person of the monarch"

On one hand, I don't understand how "Attachment to" is governance. Are the people attached, or is the governance attached?

It's the principle of governance, right? I take that as "the principle by which the government operates"--does the government command the assent of the people via loyalty to the person of the monarch, loyalty to his dynasty, etc.

As for your question below, I think it's the result of a misreading. I don't think Wolfe should be read as suggesting that monarchy is truly the ideal form of government unless the monarch is in fact God Himself. C.S. Lewis makes a similar point in *\*The Weight of Glory\**--I'm fairly confident that Wolfe had this passage in mind:

I believe in political equality. But there are two opposite reasons for being a democrat. You may think all men so good that they deserve a share in the government of the commonwealth, and so wise that the commonwealth needs their advice. That is, in my opinion, the false, romantic doctrine of democracy. On the other hand, you may believe fallen men to be so wicked that not one of them can be trusted with any irresponsible power over his fellows.

That I believe to be the true ground of democracy. I do not believe that God created an egalitarian world. I believe the authority of parent over child, husband over wife, learned over simple to have been as much a part of the original plan as the authority of man over beast. I believe that if we had not fallen, Filmer would be right, and patriarchal monarchy would be the sole lawful government. But since we have learned sin, we have found, as Lord Acton says, that "all power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The only remedy has been to take away the powers and substitute a legal fiction of equality. The authority of father and husband has been rightly abolished on the legal plane, not because this authority is in itself bad (on the contrary, it is, I hold, divine in origin), but because fathers and husbands are bad. Theocracy has been rightly abolished not because it is bad that learned priests should govern ignorant laymen, but because priests are wicked men like the rest of us. Even the authority of man over beast has had to be interfered with because it is constantly abused. (C.S. Lewis, "Membership," from *The Weight of Glory*, pp. 168-7)

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brunians at brunians.org — 02 Apr 2009, 17:48 · in reply to Son of Witz

Witz: go read Plato's "Republic", Aristotle's "Politics" and Niccolo Machiavelli's two works "Discourses On The First Ten Books Of Titus Livius" and "The Prince".

This will give you the vocabulary that you currently lack for discussing this kind of thing.

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Craig Brewer — 02 Apr 2009, 17:49 · in reply to John Watkins

I think you're absolutely right. I think the fact that the quote ends with a reference to Triskele is supposed to show that there's a right way to understand the kind of "attachment" and a wrong way. There's blind devotion to a master (dog/man) and there's loyalty to a true Divine Ruler, which isn't blind at all.

Then there's also the fact that Severian is answering still with the Torturer's in mind, whose secret is total obeisance. So is this supposed to be a "universal" answer to Wolfe's ideas on governance, or something more specific to Severian's situation?

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James Wynn — 02 Apr 2009, 18:01 · in reply to Son of Witz

ok, is the last one meant to be a joke about our current situation?  
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Essentially it means that the attachment is to the representative system divorced from the representatives themselves.

On one hand, I don't understand how "Attachment to" is governance.  
Are the people attached, or is the governance attached?

I believe "attachment to" equals "the authority upon which the governing body governs the governed."

Let me rephrase? This seems like a sort of religious right position  
(maybe I'm totally wrong)

You're wrong so far as I know.

So, would anyone toss away democracy  
in favor of a monarch? How can this notion not be "largely ideal"  
when it hinges upon the character of a single person?

Well, Severian doesn't call this Divine Right but Divine Right king would be a subset of this.

The Athenians did it with regularity. The Romans did it with Augustus (and made him a god).  
The Germans did it in the 30s. The Russians allowed their short-lived democracy to be

overthrown by the Bolsheviks and soon devoted themselves to a personality cult centered around Stalin. It happens all the time when the stakes become high enough and a democracy lacks (or fails to tolerate) genuine leaders the people trust to make hard choices untainted by personal aggrandizement/enrichment. It's something to think about in the US right now with public approval of congress steadily closing in on 10% for the last 4 years or so.

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Well, Severian doesn't say Divine Right is the highest. He says it is the first after Anarchy. Perhaps that explains how Democracy moves to Divine Right.

J.

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Jerry Friedman — 02 Apr 2009, 22:15 · in reply to Son of Witz

--- On Thu, 4/2/09, Son of Witz <sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org> wrote: ...

ok, is the last one meant to be a joke about our current situation? Abstraction, largely ideal.

Yes, only not necessarily a joke. (At least, I didn't laugh.) I think the majority of Americans who think about such things are attached to our form of government, not because of specific leaders or laws, but because of abstract qualities such as popular voting, representation rather than deciding everything by referendum, checks and balances, rule of law, protection of individual freedoms, and maybe others. ...

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Of course some would. Not me.

How can this  
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I take "ideal" to mean "existing in the realm of ideas".

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Because it allows for personal attachment, a praiseworthy trait in humans and dogs (as Master Malrubius's questions are designed to point out) and possibly a more reliable kind of loyalty than an abstract system can claim.

I think we're supposed to take the classification  
Severian learned as naive and Master Malrubius as showing what's wrong with it. At the least, we and Severian are supposed to consider that there's as much to be said for monarchy as against it, as in the quotations from Aquinas and the ancients that Stanislaus kindly posted (so I could pretend I knew all along about those opinions). And we may even be supposed to think that Severian's list is completely backwards, contrary to what he and we were taught. Placing monarchy "highest" would be relative--not necessarily good, but least evil.

In "The Best Introduction to the Mountains", Wolfe praises the societies of a time and place where democracy was known, but hereditary rulers and conquerors were more common (I think).

Anyway, Severian is destined to be the sole ruler (except for some internal colleagues), so he

needs to appreciate the advantages of sole rule.

The Commonwealth shows no sign of democracy that I remember, a fact compatible with the classification of principles of governance from low to high, not bad to good. It's striking that nonetheless Severian was taught that our kind of democracy is the highest form. Condition of Primitivity? Or just a way of putting the reader's likely preconceptions on the table in order to subvert them?

Jerry Friedman

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Matthew Weber — 02 Apr 2009, 22:20 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

On Thu, Apr 2, 2009 at 3:15 PM, Jerry Friedman <jerry\_friedman at yahoo.com> wrote:

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I'm not sure that's at all the case. I think here Wolfe is making a point about how he believes God established governance in the human sphere, and how far human beings have departed from it. It would certainly be consistent with Wolfe's Thomism.

Matt +

Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.  
Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), Nicomachean Ethics, bk. VIII, ch. 1

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Jerry Friedman — 02 Apr 2009, 23:27 · in reply to Matthew Weber

--- On Thu, 4/2/09, Matthew Weber <palaeologos at gmail.com> wrote: ...

On Thu, Apr 2, 2009 at 3:15 PM, Jerry Friedman  
<jerry\_friedman at yahoo.com> wrote:

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That is, God established monarchy, and we (but not the Commonwealth) have departed from it? But which do you think Wolfe means is "higher", monarchy or our kind of democracy?

A question that just occurred to me: Which of the principles applies the best to the Ascians? To Communist and Fascist dictatorships?

Jerry Friedman

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Gwern Branwen — 03 Apr 2009, 03:15 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

On Thu, Apr 2, 2009 at 7:27 PM, Jerry Friedman <jerry\_friedman at yahoo.com> wrote:

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Jerry Friedman

The Ascians we aren't told much about, but I think from the Tale of the righteous Asican, we are meant to assume that the glimpses confirm our suspicion of a Chinese mandarin-style system: one where a small group of officials are ultimately in charge, in the name of the people/social harmony.

"The roots of the tree are the populace. The leaves fall, but the tree remains." "Correct Thought

is the thought of the populace. The populace cannot betray the populace or the Group of Seventeen." "How shall the state be most vigorous? It shall be most vigorous when it is without conflict. How shall it be without conflict? When it is without disagreement. How shall disagreement be banished? By banishing the four causes of disagreement: lies, foolish talk, boastful talk, and talk which serves only to incite quarrels. How shall the four causes be banished? By speaking only Correct Thought. Then shall the state be without disagreement. Being without disagreement it shall be without conflict. Being without conflict it shall be vigorous, strong, and secure."

I don't know how familiar y'all are with the Chinese classics, but when I first read *\_The Citadel of the Autarch\_*, I found this to be a chilling parody of both the style and content of Confucian works like *\_The Great Learning\_*.

Anyway, so given the 'Group of Seventeen', and the threat of suicide if they are insulted, one of the classifications seem most apt:

"Attachment to a greater or lesser board of electors, as framers of the law."

gvern

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 03 Apr 2009, 17:51 · in reply to Gvern Branwen

On Thu, Apr 2, 2009 at 8:15 PM, Gvern Branwen <gvern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

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Interesting. I was reminded of Mao's Little Red Book.

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Adam Thornton — 03 Apr 2009, 18:38 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Apr 3, 2009, at 12:51 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

On Thu, Apr 2, 2009 at 8:15 PM, Gvern Branwen <gvern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

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I'm pretty sure the intended allusion was the second, but I would be greatly surprised if Mao didn't have the first in mind when penning the second.

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Gvern Branwen — 03 Apr 2009, 18:44 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Fri, Apr 3, 2009 at 1:51 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

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Well, I've never actually read his Little Red Book. Perhaps if I had, I'd've found it a closer match,  
gwern

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John Watkins — 03 Apr 2009, 18:57 · in reply to Adam Thornton

Agreed. It's far more likely that the idea of superficially Confucian totalitarianism came from Mao than from Wolfe.

On Fri, Apr 3, 2009 at 2:38 PM, Adam Thornton <adam at io.com> wrote:

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Stanisław Bocian — 03 Apr 2009, 19:16 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

Hello!

On 3 kwietnia 2009, Jerry Friedman wrote:

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Jerry Friedman

Yes, the classification of types of government in Wolfe repeats modern views. It can seem unfamiliar because it uses somewhat more precise terms than in school class, but if you will look into some good handbook, eg Giovanni Sartori, THE THEORY OF DEMOCRACY REVISITED.

<http://www.ou.edu/cas/psc/booksartori.htm>

you will see essentially that kind of definition. "Attachment to an abstraction conceived as including the body of electors, other bodies giving rise to them, and numerous other elements, largely ideal."

This has many functions. It makes us think whether our instinctive support for our own form of government is necessarily right, of course. But it is also historically correct. The ecumenical empires (this is a technical term) of such a sort as Commonwealth, do not give rise to new theories; they arise after the previous form of government failed, very often out of desperation.

In the Roman Empire the emperors were worshipped as gods, as a matter of common-sense policy. At the same time in elite schools the future administrators of Empire were composing speeches praising Harmodius and Aristogeton, the Tyrannicides, and proclaiming that the freedom was the highest value, and the killing of a tyrant the greatest service to the Republic.

Copies of their statues were mass-produced.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyrannicide>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmodius\\_and\\_Aristogeiton\\_\(sculpture\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmodius_and_Aristogeiton_(sculpture))

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmodius\\_and\\_Aristogeiton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmodius_and_Aristogeiton)

In fact, until the fall of Byzantium in 1453, and also for most of the history of the Holy Roman Empire, until its abolition in 1806, emperors were legally not hereditary, but elected. Roman Emperors were elected by the Senate, Byzantine by Senate, army and people (in practice, the Army and People were "electing" the emperor by appropriate cries during the coronation, but the legal pretense was there).

[http://books.google.com/books?id=ozN1uextK7IC&pg=PA72&lpg=PA72&dq=election+of+emperor+of+byzantium+legal+theory&source=bl&ots=Pu\\_BxzMPK0&sig=NfjXQdTTXu5IjrX6YPBSz4XKiw&hl=en&ei=fiHWSd7HNsuKsAbyisWTDw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=6](http://books.google.com/books?id=ozN1uextK7IC&pg=PA72&lpg=PA72&dq=election+of+emperor+of+byzantium+legal+theory&source=bl&ots=Pu_BxzMPK0&sig=NfjXQdTTXu5IjrX6YPBSz4XKiw&hl=en&ei=fiHWSd7HNsuKsAbyisWTDw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6)

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/corpus1.html>

Corpus Iuris Civilis of Justinian:

"The Digest: Prologue

The Emperor Caesar, Flavius, Justinianus, Pious, Fortunate, Renowned, Conqueror, and Triumpher, Ever Augustus, to Tribonianus His Quaestor, Greeting:

With the aid of God governing Our Empire which was delivered to Us by His Celestial Majesty, We carry on war successfully. We adorn peace and maintain the Constitution of the State, and have such confidence in the protection of Almighty God that We do not depend upon Our arms, or upon Our soldiers, or upon those who conduct Our Wars, or upon Our own genius, but We solely, place Our reliance upon the providence of the Holy Trinity, from which are derived the elements of the entire world and their disposition throughout the globe. ... Our law is partly written, partly unwritten, as among the Greeks. The written law consists of statutes, plebiscites, senatusconsults, enactments of the Emperors, edicts of the magistrates, and answers of those learned in the law. A statute is an enactment of the Roman people, which it used to make on the motion of a senatorial magistrate, as for instance a consul. A plebiscite is an enactment of the commonalty, such as was made on the motion of one of their own magistrates, as a tribune.... A senatusconsult is a command and ordinance of the senate, for when the Roman people had been so increased that it was difficult to assemble it together for the purpose of enacting statutes, it seemed right that the senate should be consulted instead of the people. Again, what the Emperor determines has the force of a statute, the people having conferred on him all their authority and power by the *lex regia*, which was passed concerning his office and authority. Consequently, whatever the Emperor settles by rescript, or decides in his judicial capacity, or ordains edicts, is clearly a statute: and these are what are called constitutions. "

The description of the Commonwealth shows similar disconnect between theory and practice. Commonwealth is the English translation of Republic, and the officials are taught in the schools that the democracy is the final form of government. But in practice the state is governed by Autarchs, and administered by military officers and troop detachment. People - not officials or nobles - are worshipping Autarch.

Notice also that the suggestions supporting monarchy come not from the real Malrubius, but from an aquastor, ie from Hiero-xxx.

Finally, I think that it is important to remember a peculiar Christian doctrine about the government: each legal government is such only because it is given its power directly by God. In fact, the familiar XVI-century theory of the divine right of kings is a convenient corruption of that teaching. Of course, a hereditary king has been given his right to govern directly by God, but the same applies to any government, including democratic ones. This explains how can Justinian claim in the same letter to have his power both directly from God, and by the law made by people.

<http://www.drbo.org/chapter/52013.htm>

Epistle Of Saint Paul To The Romans, Chapter 13

" Let every soul be subject to higher powers:

for there is no power but from God: and

those that are, are ordained of God.

2Therefore he that resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God.

And they that resist, purchase to themselves damnation.

3 For princes are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil.

Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power?

Do that which is good: and thou shalt have praise from the same.

4 For he is God's minister to thee, for good. But if thou do that which is evil, fear: for he beareth not the sword in vain. For he is God's minister: an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doth evil. 5 Wherefore be subject of necessity, not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake"

(Incidentally, this

is an application of the more general rule of secondary and primary

causation. <http://www.enotes.com/science-religion-encyclopedia/causality-primary-secondary>

I suggest you read this entry carefully, since the distinction is crucial for understanding of the New Sun tetralogy. - BTW, I hope you will not be overly offended by that suggestion.)

Best regards,  
Stanislaus B.

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Kredyt z dopłata, nawet 200 000 zł. Sprawdź!  
<http://link.interia.pl/f20fc>

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Jerry Friedman — 04 Apr 2009, 20:40 · in reply to Stanisław Bocian

--- On Fri, 4/3/09, Stanisław Bocian <sbocian at poczta.fm> wrote:

From: Stanisław Bocian <sbocian at poczta.fm>

Subject: Re: (urth) : "Principlesofgovernaaance"Gene Wolfe's Politics

To: "urth" <urth at urth.net>

Date: Friday, April 3, 2009, 1:16 PM

Hello!

On 3 kwietnia 2009, Jerry Friedman wrote:

Yes, the classification of types of government in Wolfe repeats

modern views. It can seem unfamiliar because it uses somewhat more

precise terms than in school class, but if you will look into some

good handbook, eg Giovanni Sartori, THE THEORY OF DEMOCRACY REVISITED.

<http://www.ou.edu/cas/psc/booksartori.htm>

you will see essentially that kind of definition.

"Attachment to an abstraction conceived as including the body of electors, other bodies giving rise to them, and numerous other elements, largely ideal."

I may not read that right away. :-)

This has many functions. It makes us think whether our instinctive support for our own form of government is necessarily right, of course. But it is also historically correct. The ecumenical empires (this is a technical term)

Meaning what? It's not in the NSOED.

of such a sort as Commonwealth, do not give rise to new theories; they arise after the previous form of government failed, very often out of desperation.

[Roman lip service to tyrannicide]

In fact, until the fall of Byzantium in 1453, and also for most of the history of the Holy Roman Empire, until its abolition in 1806, emperors were legally not hereditary, but elected. Roman Emperors were elected by the Senate, Byzantine by Senate, army and people (in practice, the Army and People were "electing" the emperor by appropriate cries during the coronation, but the legal pretense was there).

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I didn't know that about the Roman emperors, so thanks.

I probably don't need to say that the Communist countries maintained a similar pretense and a few still do, including the hereditary ruler of North Korea.

Anyway, I think this is a very interesting and believable answer to my question about why the political theory Severian learned is inconsistent with the reality of his nation. Though the idea of democracy must have survived quite a long time, since the Commonwealth doesn't have even nominally democratic institutions, and other than the real Master M.'s lesson, there's no trace of democracy in the past.

[Justinian on Roman law]

The description of the Commonwealth shows similar disconnect between theory and practice. Commonwealth is the English translation of Republic,

More or less. As first used, it meant the common good rather than a political entity (NSOED), and I'd say it retains that as a connotation.

and the officials are taught in the schools that the democracy is the final form of government. But in practice the state is governed by Autarchs, and administered by military officers and troop detachment. People - not officials or nobles - are worshipping Autarch.

Notice also that the suggestions supporting monarchy come not from the real Malrubius, but from an aquastor, ie from Hiero-xxx.

...

(Incidentally, this is an application of the more general rule of secondary and primary causation.

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I suggest you read this entry carefully, since the distinction is crucial for understanding of the New Sun tetralogy. - BTW, I hope you will not be overly offended by that suggestion.)

Not at all. I did mildly resent your telling me to notice that the questioning Malrubius is an aquastor, but then I noticed that I'd referred to him twice as plain "Master Malrubius", so that ended my resentment, as you had reason to say what you did.

I read the article on primary and secondary causation. No surprises, but it did say clearly what I'd occasionally understood vaguely.

By the way, thanks for the comment on the translation of sundial mottoes, which I think does go well with Severian's translations.

Jerry Friedman

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Son of Witz — 07 Apr 2009, 13:56 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

On Apr 4, 2009, at 1:40 PM, Jerry Friedman wrote:  
Though the idea of democracy must have survived quite a long time, since the Commonwealth doesn't have even nominally democratic institutions, and other than the real Master M.'s lesson, there's no trace of democracy in the past.

well, there is this detail at least:

Shadow X The Last Year:

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"Then that is enough for you. Look here," she held up the brown book. "Here it says, 'It was the thought of Thalelaeus the Great that the democracy'---that means the People---'desired to be ruled by some power superior to itself, and of Yrierix the Sage that the commonality would

never permit one differing from themselves to hold high office. Notwithstanding this, each is called The Perfect Master.' " I did not see what she meant, and said nothing.

\*\*\*\*\*

FWIW

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Jerry Friedman — 07 Apr 2009, 14:16 · in reply to Son of Witz

--- On Tue, 4/7/09, Son of Witz <sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org> wrote:

On Apr 4, 2009, at 1:40 PM, Jerry Friedman wrote:

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Ah, good one. So Severian is taught that something like our democracy is the "highest" form of government, while the word itself (or what Wolfe decided to translate that way) is so rare that Thecla thinks she needs to explain it. At least to a boy below her class.

Jerry Friedman