

"Principles of governance" Gene Wolfe's Politics

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 02 Apr 2009

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Son of Witz — 02 Apr 2009, 17:50

-----Original Message-----

From: John Watkins [mailto:john.watkins04 at gmail.com]

Sent: Thursday, April 2, 2009 10:41 AM

To: 'The Urth Mailing List'

Subject: Re: (urth) "Principles of governance" Gene Wolfe's Politics

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)

I like this Lewis quote.

that's my point. Is Wolfe positing this as a practical solution. I agree that it couldn't work with out the monarch being essentially god. which is why I wonder why Malrubius is asking this of the future Autarch. I understand Severian is in a process of revoking false allegiance and oaths, and orienting himself to the Increate, but that's theology, not politics. Severian will also be the political ruler, and his first answer is the Democracy, but it's as if Malrubius's switch to theological perspective is intended to point out that the governance should be thought of in those terms.

OR, is this Malrubius's way of using this theological metaphor as a way of telling this future ruler to orient himself to God so that he can rule best.

~witz

ps, not sure how I screwed up the subject title so badly.

John Watkins — 02 Apr 2009, 17:59 · in reply to Son of Witz

I think it's the latter. Another Lewis bit that comes to mind is his point (in **The Discarded Image**) that the physical arrangement of Dante's cosmos (with Satan in the center and the Empyrean at the periphery) is the inverse, as though in a mirror, of the metaphysical reality of the cosmos (in which God is centrally important and Satan is the universe's least significant being.) Lewis uses the idea in **The Great Divorce** as well when he describes the Harrowing of Hell in terms of Christ "shrinking" himself into something tiny and seemingly insignificant to enter into the infinitesimal portion of Creation that is Hell.

Anyway, if I'm right about the connection, I think what Wolfe is doing here is suggesting that the "highest" level of political governance might be the "lowest" level of theological--that is, loyalty to the abstract principles of good and evil is good politics and bad theology, but loyalty to the person of the monarch is good theology but bad politics. The passages doesn't come out and say that, of course, but it seems to me to be the allusion.

Also, I know you're fond of the bit in *Long Sun* when NarratorHorn portrays Oreb as viewing Silk as his god--that, it seems to me, is an elaboration on the bit about Triskele here. The loyalty of an animal to its master is more akin to the loyalty of a worshipper to God than it is to the loyalty of a citizen to the state (at least, so we hope!)

On Thu, Apr 2, 2009 at 1:50 PM, Son of Witz <sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org> wrote:

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