

The Eyeflash Miracles Part 2

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 16 Sep 2014

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Marc Aramini — 16 Sep 2014, 02:50

COMMENTARY:

The opening quote sets the ironic nature of the entire Judeo-Christian scheme of salvation — expecting a secular power to redeem the Jews in this world, the Christ whom Christians believe in was very different — a humble carpenter who scorned secular authority. In Anatole France’s “Procurator of Judea”, from which the opening quote comes, Pilate goes over the political machinations of his career and its significance, but of course his name is only remembered in history for his worldly authority over Christ. His name is known because of something (in France’s story) he has forgotten, something he never realized would have an impact on the world, even spreading and promulgating through Rome.

The United States has clearly been shaken up politically — with a capital in Niagara but extant cities throughout West Virginia, Georgia, and Texas still probably under a moved central government, the only sign we have for what has happened is increasing mechanization and widespread unemployment. People must live off the “card” - a poor government stipend. There is no trace of anything bad happening to Washington D.C., but it is absent from the text.

Tib becomes a wonder worker though he has no real-world presence, called by Mr. Parker a ghost, his identity destroyed because he has no social status or importance. Two basic mythic patterns can explain Tib — the primary question in the text is whether he has two sets of parents (as Silk does in **The Book of the Long Sun**) — is he truly one of the affluent and doomed gifted children produced experimentally, who are hunted to extinction (as children at the birth of Moses and Jesus were), or if he arose naturally through the humble poor children used as controls in the experiment. In the later case, there is only one father and mother figure, and that father is moved to treachery by societal forces. One of these patterns follows the Hindu origin story of Krishna as an avatar of Vishnu, the other the Christian one — the humble birth of the Jewish carpenter into an oppressed people, whose miraculous nature is both fully divine and fully human. The importance of this distinction in the text lies in separating the father and mother images in Tib’s visions.

Tib’s child’s perspective pictures the angels as fantasies, and though there is no indication that he has ever read Baum’s Oz books, that conflation carries the syncretism of Dr. Prathivi to a new level: the miraculous dream of Oz contextualizes divine power, perhaps even creating a kind of **Pilgrim’s Progress** as Tib performs miracles. It definitely seems that the point at which the Oz visions clearly enter the waking world follow Tib’s baptism at the hands of Nitty, though before this point he still performed miracles.

Little Tib’s quest for Sugarland, ironically, is for a real place in Texas in the Houston Area incorporated in 1959 and founded as a sugar plantation. Either chosen because of Sugarland’s pleasing name or because it is where his family lived, his trip there is filled with all kinds of miraculous and visionary events, and though he perceives it as a kind of paradise, it is likely that it will be ordinary. People know who you are there, according to Tib — in the rest of society,

people only know what their eyes tell them.

The fantastic slowly enters the waking world over the course of the novella, and Little Tib is definitely awake by the time he dances over the cliff with the lion, whom he identifies as an angel. There is ultimately no distinction between the spiritual and physical worlds by the end, and it is Tib who pictures the spiritual realm of the angels as the magical world of Oz. The charlatantry of Oz from the books becomes a symbol of genuine miraculous spirituality throughout the story.

BLINDNESS AND “EYEFLASH”:

The blindness of Tib highlights another one of the beautiful themes of the story: black, white; rich, poor; young, old — these distinctions are irrelevant to Tib. Only touch, human interaction, and how people treat one another matter. Physical boundaries and obstacles don’t matter — he can dance on air or squeeze through walls — the miraculous world slowly becomes the real world for Tib when he is not deceived by his eyes.

The characters of Nitty and Mr. Parker play with this light and dark imagery, but it is Mr. Parker who forgets about his friend and custodian by the end — and rather than express ire or displeasure, Nitty simply continues on, saying that often blacks and whites are both guilty of forgetting when they are helped by someone different than themselves. The story makes a point to explicate that Nitty’s stereotyped dialect is a show assumed for the brain damaged Mr. Parker and society as a whole. Tib can never see the external differences between Prathivi, Nitty, and Mr. Parker — blindness is actually an advantage to him in perceiving spiritual truths, though it has deprived him of an identity in this society.

An eye flash is actually an eye injury and irritation that occurs after being exposed to harsh UV and infrared light. The attempt to identify and neutralize Tib through retinal scanning results in his complete freedom from their rigid social structure and identification system.

FEMALE AUTHORITY FIGURES:

The king of Oz is a woman that Tib recognizes as his mother, though she does not look like her. The giantess, also called his mother, will sweep him away if he is not careful. The railway police are two women, and the doctor is also a female. Save for the man in the white coat who denies knowledge of Tib and claims he is “nobody”, the only male with a prominent position seems to be Tib’s father as an avatar of Indra, and even that is something akin to being a pawn working for others. The president of the United States mentioned in the text is male, however.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

The copious Oz references are recounted in the summary above, though I refer readers to William Ansley’s more specific postings on the Urth Mailing List referenced below, linked by Matthew Groves. Most of those references are to the original Baum book — for the most part the characters serve as spiritual guides and aides to Tib.

The opening quote highlights the theme of the story: our secular understanding of events and people often misses their true relevance entirely, and Tib, Nitty, and Mr. Parker being cast out as irrelevant and extraneous members of society is distorted and invalid. Their true significance is something far more numinous and miraculous. Social status does not equate to value, but Tib’s ability to generate an income in this particular society has been relegated to zero — he has no identity and no worth without his eyes.

The novella also shows a slow progression from realistic low mimesis fiction to fantasy as the two worlds interact and overlap. At first these are separated into dreaming and waking worlds, but soon the presence of the Oz manifestations are definitely present when Tib is awake, influencing and helping him.

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS:

Tib is identified with both the boy Krishna and Jesus. Both are responsible for extreme reforms in their respective religious systems. The play which Dr. Prithivi hopes to enact is a pivotal scene in Hindu philosophy that marks a turning away from a religion of appeasement and sacrifice to one based more on karma and dharma, performing one's duties with regard to all life. Krishna, the god Vishnu given flesh and born as a boy, convinces his village to stop sacrifice and worship to Indra, the god of the clouds, because it is the nearby natural mountain Govardhan that provides for their needs. This angers Indra, and he brings a storm to punish them. Krishna lifts up the mountain to protect the village from the storm. The real play is interrupted by a storm here.

Besides this scene, we must mention the birth of Krishna. King Kamsa was disturbed by a prophecy that his sister Devaki's eighth child would kill him, so he locked her away. After killing the first six children she conceived, Vishnu became involved and ordered the seventh child switched out of the womb with the eight handed goddess Yogmaya. After the manifestation of that goddess to Kamsa, Vishnu entered Devaki's womb and became her eighth child, known as Krishna. The goddess put his guards to sleep and he escaped to be raised in a small village by cowherds, where eventually he would philosophically defeat Indra and return to destroy King Kamsa as well.

Christ's story is one of God born in a manger into relative poverty, turning the concept of the secular Messiah on its head and healing the poor and the sick, providing spiritual balm. At his own birth, there are two fairly distinctive gospel accounts of Jesus' nativity. In Luke, Joseph and Mary are traveling from Nazareth for the census and stop to give birth in a manger in Bethlehem. In Matthew, King Herod has ordered the death of all children under the age of two in Bethlehem and Jesus' family flees to Egypt before later going to Nazareth. This is the story Tib thinks of when speaking to Indra.

These multiple accounts of origin all apply to Little Tib. Under the first scenario, that of his identification with Krishna, he would have been born in the wealthier and affluent "experimental" group and then switched with a poor child. Under the Christian scenario, he would have been born of the poor family, as in a manger, and had only one set of parents.

One further religious element outside of the baptism can be seen in the symbolism of the lion discussed above and the slaying of the demon Hiranyakasipu by Vishnu on the side of Dr. Prithivi's bus. This is paralleled with the casting out the demon legion into pigs recounted in three of the gospels. Through Hiranyakasipu's name's meaning, we see that he is the gnome king as well as the computer, and his tale highlights the futility of desiring power over others. Hiranyakasipu even tries to kill his own son for his devotion to Vishnu, which also has expression in the Wolfe novella. Tib feels that he is in front of the computer again when he faces his father after the Indra masks comes off on Prithivi's stage, and in many ways George Tibb is possessed by Legion too, and is therefore symbolically Hiranyakasipu as well as Indra (both overcome by Krishna).

One final allusion that cements Tib's association with Christ is the awful feeling he gets sitting in the wooden chair with its wooden arms, so reminiscent of a crucifix. This would seem to be the

best argument (as well as the thought of the new baby which looks so very old which Prithivi's flue music invokes) that when the Wizard says that Tib wound up being "the ruler of us all", he is literally referring to Tib's identity and destiny as the divine come again.

MR. JEFFERSON VS. GEORGE TIBBS

In the final scenes of the novella, the character who provides the most exposition is the man who wears the mask of Indra. The primary question is whether Little Tib is the natural son of George Tibbs or if he is indeed one of the children from the experimental group, the only affluent one who escaped destruction. Is the father who comes for him behind the mask of Indra a wealthy man who exercises real power or a brainwashed and conditioned poor man?

It seems both versions of Tib's paternity could possibly be true, for the Wizard, when he finally appears, reverses time. While both visitors to the school for the blind are identified as Tib's father, one gives his name as Mr. Jefferson and Tib knows that he will have a "nice" car. The other is George Tibbs, who gets into the Biogenetic Engineering Program through its agricultural program. He is definitely the poor father of Tib's "old" home, the one where the mother would swat at a rat with a broom. In the final outcome, it seems that Tib was indeed always one of the poor children, and the story of Christ the model rather than that of Krishna.

The presence of the engineered children is a false secular explanation — contrary to what Indra claims, sometimes Gods really are born in cowsheds.

NAMES AND TIBB'S EVE

While it might be a coincidence, there is a modern holiday known as Tibb's Eve (and also Tipp's Eve) which is held at the end of the Advent season, December 23rd, during which it is appropriate to drink. The timing of this is fortuitous for our novella, and perhaps its promise of celebration is more appropriate as an allusion than its reputation for the consumption of alcohol.

George means "earth worker." Tibb can be derived from Theobold, which implies "bold people".

Parker's last name simply means "keeper of the park."

Prithivi is the Sanskrit name for "earth" and can also imply "that which holds everything."

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Why are spiritual visitations and powers manifested as the figures of Oz to Tib, beyond the aforementioned "sense of wonder" of a young boy, where the stories of religion and fantasy are both full of awe?

Is Little Tib a Christ figure or more like a wonder-worker favored by angelic forces? The feeling of dread associated with the wooden arms of the chair suggest that he is indeed somehow Christ, as does the opening quote from Anatole France's story.

Does the Wizard actually completely change reality in the final scenes of the novel, altering the story of Tib's paternity, or was Mr. Jefferson a cover for George Tibbs and only the cover identity erased? Tibbs did fancy that he was related to important people or presidents, and this perhaps suggest that Mr. Jefferson is simply a pseudonym and false identity. (Does Little Tib only have one set of parents, or two?) I lean towards the one set, which aligns more with the Christian metaphor and Jesus' relative obscurity (highlighted in the opening quote from Anatole France)

rather than the story of Krishna.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS

Despite the bleak future of poverty and the increasing scorn for menial workers and educators inherent in an automated future, the small betrayal of Parker, and the large betrayal of Little Tib's father, this story offers a fairly unambiguous ray of redemption and hope. The increasing infiltration of fantasy and the spiritual as the narrative continues echoes another of Wolfe's examinations of the underlying reality of the spiritual world — "Trip, Trap" — though our ending here is tinged with far less irony. "Westwind" was more overt in its exploration of the relationship between the Deity and his creations, but He was separate and distant, unable to interfere in the lives of his subjects, solely providing a cathartic reassurance in the form of metaphorical prayer. In "The Eyeflash Miracles", we see spiritual assistance and interference from start to finish. Nitty's acceptance of being forgotten by Mr. Parker and the removal of the mask from Tib's father are purely redemptive in nature. Though filled with tears from start to finish, the novella is one of the few works in Wolfe's output in the 1970s that has an unambiguously triumphant ending, though Little Tib has not arrived at his final destination. Sometimes it is the path that is important, paved with gold or not.

RESOURCES:

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