

Long Sun and the Ancient Mediterranean

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 04 Jan 2015

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6705>

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Marcos Bidoli Gouvêa — 04 Jan 2015, 22:16

Hi all,

I'm a long time lurker but this is the first time I've posted in a quite a while. Last year I reread the whole Solar Cycle and gathered some thoughts to share. Between my first reading and this latest go I became Classicist, and I was surprised to find how much of the Long Sun was opened up by the knowledge I had picked up.

Usually when I think about Wolfe's reading in classical literature I look to the Soldier books, but now I think it is even more vividly at work in how he draws daily life in Viron. For Latro, Greek culture and even his experience of the gods is alien to what he knows (even if he remembered what he knows). But for the Vironese animal sacrifice is a common affair (even if not on Sun Street). The same goes for dancing, shrill singing, augury, and reciting prayers. (I thought I read about a sistrum at one of the sacrifices, but I cannot find the place at the moment.) These are all practices that are very well-attested across ancient Mediterranean cultures. They were as central to what people meant by 'religion' then as they are distant to them now. One of the great effects of the Long Sun books is to paint all these characteristics drawn out of our own history into the "foreign" culture of this future society. I think Wolfe is having fun disguising these commonplaces of the ancient world as futuristic developments, or at least playing the futuristic element off the ancient one.

My favorite example is his deployment of Euhemerism. Euhemerus famously proposed that the gods worshiped by Greeks and others were actually great kings and heroes who had been elevated to status of gods by reverent followers. (Fame is pretty much all Euhemerus has going for him-- none of works of his survive.) I think Wolfe engaged in something of a thought experiment in the Whorl: in what sort of scenario would men again find it a relevant, even edgy explanation to say that the gods were once men? Belief in multiple gods is not commonly taken to be a plausible view in the west, and so it is easy to dismiss the disturbing character of Euhemerus' claim. It's just not our problem. However, it is much easier to find it plausible that computerized personalities might wield godlike power over us. In the Whorl, there is really very little difference between what Scylla is and what a sea goddess might have been to the Greeks. There's an impishly Chestertonian manner to how Wolfe takes makes an ancient theory of apparently little relevance to us and makes it a genuinely exciting development in his novel. He seems to be insisting that history does not leave everything behind, and that what made sense to humans in one day can again be plausible.

I have one more thought on this, but I'll save it to avoid overstaying my welcome on a first foray in a long time. I'd be interested to hear thoughts; I could not find any discussion of Euhemerism directly in the Whorl archives, but I'm sure there's something I've missed there.

---Marcos

Daniel Otto Jack Petersen — 05 Jan 2015, 10:06 · in reply to Marcos Bidoli Gouvêa

Thank you, Marcos! Very enlightening. I had clocked this at a very rough and intuitive level, but it's great to hear it confirmed and expanded upon by a specialist.

"He seems to be insisting that history does not leave everything behind, and that what made sense to humans in one day can again be plausible."

I'd love to see someone do a study of Wolfe's cycle that maps it onto to contemporary culture's enmeshment in computers, especially as regards celebrities and in regard to the heroic in gaming.

Thanks again,

DOJP

On Sun, Jan 4, 2015 at 10:16 PM, Marcos Bidoli Gouv?a <mgouvea at uchicago.edu> wrote:
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Nessun Saprà — 05 Jan 2015, 11:27 · in reply to Marcos Bidoli Gouvêa

Interesting point. Another one which could be of importance here, is that Euhemerus was considered a "Bergaios" (like Pytheas or Antiphanes) in antiquity, i.e. someone who is deliberately telling lies.

Nessuno

Von: Urth [mailto:urth-bounces at lists.urth.net] Im Auftrag von Marcos Bidoli Gouvêa Gesendet: Sonntag, 4. Januar 2015 23:16 An: urth at lists.urth.net Betreff: (urth) Long Sun and the Ancient Mediterranean

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Marc Aramini — 05 Jan 2015, 14:03 · in reply to Marcos Bidoli Gouvêa

I think this only got sent to Marcos and not the list, so a resend:

I am not sure Wolfe need ever have heard of Euhemerism to play with the themes of apotheosis. The transmogrification of typhon from satan to secular tyrant to benevolent father god shows the drive to seek authority of a lasting nature. Ultimately those who imitate God or the gods take on some of that divine nature in Wolfe. Certainly the religion of Viron was highly syncretic, with both Catholic and pagan influences on the church overt. The chasmologic writings are culled from a variety of sources, from Aurelius to more biblical ones.

I will only say the ways of the gods are not necessarily entirely foreign to Latro ... mankind and its motivations are perhaps just as inexplicable, or moreso. The true moment of change for him involves subconscious depression and disgust after the manumission ceremony of the spartans in which the slaves promised freedom are slaughtered by their "sponsors".

The idea of the theanthropos, man as god and god as man, is innately tied to Wolfe's religious ideology, and i do not find it out of place at all for him to explore the religious significance of mortals who become something more. (Though Zalmoxis holds a special place as an enemy of latro perhaps more inimical than the triple goddess)

On Sun, Jan 4, 2015 at 3:16 PM, Marcos Bidoli Gouvêa <mgouvea at uchicago.edu> wrote:
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David Stockhoff — 16 Jan 2015, 02:17 · in reply to Marcos Bidoli Gouvêa

On 1/4/2015 5:16 PM, Marcos Bidoli Gouvêa wrote:

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I also think that he is suggesting that the Whorl is about as far in "our" future as the ancient Greeks are in our past. And the reverse: that we are as close to both, that humans don't change all that much though their cultures do. That we are not that different, but that we and they are as different as we can imagine and still *can* imagine.

David Stockhoff — 16 Jan 2015, 02:20 · in reply to Nessun Saprà

On 1/5/2015 6:27 AM, Nessun Sapr? wrote:

Interesting point. Another one which could be of importance here, is that Euhemerus was considered a "Bergaios" (like Pytheas or Antiphanes) in antiquity, i.e. someone who is deliberately telling lies.

Nessuno

A troll? Well, that points us right back to the Internet, doesn't it?