

To Adam: Christ in Eden

The Whorl list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 09 Apr 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1326>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Nicholas Gevers — 09 Apr 2001, 01:25

Adam, thanks for putting the other side's views so plainly and firmly. I'll respond to your points serially.

Adam: "My immediate reaction is that I don't believe Wolfe is a utopian, even a "conservative" one; I don't believe Wolfe advocates "Natural Man" or the "Noble Savage"; and while the parallel with the ending of the MARS trilogy is interesting, I doubt that it means Wolfe is borrowing Robinson's politics (unless, reversing the usual course of events, he's become radical in his old age)."

GW is not borrowing an ideology; he has his own. He's reacting to Robinson's utopian thesis. (The relationship between GW and Robinson is a fascinating topic on its own, beginning with GW's role as an early creative mentor to KSR, and continuing through personal friendship and intertextual flourishes, notably the equivalence BLUE MARS=ON BLUE'S WATERS, GREEN MARS=IN GREEN'S JUNGLES, etc.). I interpret TBSS as a political/utopian novel, as I've said; but conservatives like Wolfe are distrustful of the very notion of utopia, for pretty obvious reasons. Thus, in responding to KSR's secular utopia, GW must express his reservations in a critical manner; and he does so by making it explicitly doubtful that Horn's utopian model (protect the poor and helpless against the inhumi, influence the inhumi to become benign) can ever be effected in a truly workable form (thus, your doubts about practical applications of the Secret of the Inhumi are justified; Wolfe intends them.) But utopia has at least a chance; humans have free will, and may select the right path forward.

In thinking about this matter, it struck me that what we have in TBSS is a sort of counterfactual scenario: call it Christ in Eden, to give the matter an appropriately religious spin. What if Christ had come not after millennia of conflict and oppression, but rather when the world was new? What if his positive example had been available almost from the start? This

is Wolfe's "conceit" in TBSS. Blue is a new world, a tabula rasa for humanity if one disregards some lingering remnants of the Neighbors, and in this it exactly resembles Robinson's Mars, an open planet in the early stages of colonisation. Blue can turn into a millennial Paradise; it can become anything. After conflict, KSR's Mars becomes a secular version of Paradise, utopia; GW, for all his conservative doubts, gives Blue a nudge towards a theistic version of the same state. Silk/Horn reins in the Man of Han, defeats Duko Rigoglio and the corrupt judges of Dorp, teaches, performs exemplary miracles, unveils the Secret that humans can exploit to their great advantage by becoming Good. Christlike, he gives Blue a shove in a benign direction, clearing the sewer of the Past so that the waters may flow beneficently again; but then he leaves, like Christ still, and we are left to infer Blue's subsequent history, in the light of our own assumptions and prejudices. GW has proffered both hope and doubt; we can take them as we will.

In this light, Brother and Sister are like Adam and Eve, or, in secular terms, like Natural Man, all choices ahead of them; they are a microcosm of Blue, that Eden of infinite potentiality. Wolfe may not believe in Natural Man; but like Sir Thomas More before him, he can engage in thought experiments—UTOPIA was about the achievements and excesses of a non-theistic Natural Utopia in which More did not believe, and Wolfe, while skeptical, will give the Noble Savage his due, moderating his savagery with theistic input so that he becomes Adam, with all Adam's strengths and weaknesses. In short, Wolfe is trying to redeem KSR's secular utopia by calling it back within the Divine fold, and simultaneously qualify KSR's optimism—a difficult, admirable balancing act.

Adam: "The more I think about it, the less I understand how the inhumis secret, or "loving one another," is supposed to render the inhumis harmless. I don't see what the colonists could do if they all loved each other that they can't do now, which would keep the inhumis from getting any human blood. As for 2), for the inhumis to voluntarily stop preying on humans, they'd have to be not just benign. They'd have to be self-sacrificing enough to give up their intelligence rather than attack humans (which, in moderation, apparently does humans no long-term harm). But if the colonists became so altruistic that the inhumis would absorb that much altruism, then they would be altruistic enough to allow the inhumis to prey

on them rather than lose their intelligence. In any case, as someone once pointed out, can the inhum really believe the colonists as a group capable of such altruism?"

Assuming (as Wolfe and Silk are, let me emphasise again, unwilling naively to do) that the Secret can be fully harnessed, it has a clear practical application. Note how often Horn/Silk emphasises the vulnerability of the poor, the elderly, and the isolated to the inhum. Answer: protect them, look after them, so that they are no longer defenseless; implement social justice, stop fighting among yourselves. Utopia, in other words. And once this has been realised, by all means offer the inhum a voluntary source of human blood; make them human, absorb them into utopia. This may sound impossible, but so do elementary Christian ideals, really; that doesn't mean they mustn't be aspired to. Some sacrifices are worthwhile. Look at Maliki's village.

Adam: "But Horn doesn't kill Jahlee as a deterrent to other inhum; he kicks her to death in anger, and is deeply ashamed of it afterwards. (And if it had been a deterrent, then it didn't work, since it was followed shortly afterwards by the mass attack.)

"I agree, though, that Jahlee's death is a plausible development, though not inevitable. My complaint was not at the failure of the inhum subplot to resolve in a utopian fashion, but at its failure to resolve at all (except as far as Jahlee is concerned). The Secret was a big letdown (I don't buy the theory that Horn has concealed the real secret from us, for reasons I've stated before, and if I did it wouldn't make me happier), and the victory over the massed inhum at the wedding solves nothing.

"The more I think about that wedding attack, though, the fishier it sounds. Such a mass attack (at least six hundred inhum) seems to be unprecedented. It must be very rare, at least, or Blue would have to be far more militarized and regimented than it is. Would Juganu really be able to get hundreds of inhum deviate from their usual habits and join him in his private revenge? And would these inhum continue the attack once they saw that the wedding party was armed, contrary to expectations?"

Jahlee's death foreshadows the wedding massacre, which IS a deterrent. Adam, I think you miss the real

motives for Juganu's attack, motives which numerous other inhumis share. Motive Number One: Horn/Silk and his wife know the Secret, and those around them may well have got wind of it too. So: attack en masse and kill them when they are all together. Why do you think Juganu was lurking about in New Viron, if not to spy on Horn/Silk and assess his intentions, arrange his death if possible? Motive Number Two: Silk/Horn is a Messiah to the Inhumis, the human being in whom they have reposed much of their hope of becoming truly human; now he has turned against them, and they feel betrayed. So attack en masse and kill him. And forget the risks of doing so.

In other words, the inhumis subplot certainly resolves itself; the terms on which humans should interact with the inhumis are laid down: tame them, in a nutshell, first by force and then by another sort of sanguinary suasion, as it were. The only worthy "covenant with evil" is one which makes evil good.

--Nick Gevers.

Adam Stephanides — 11 Apr 2001, 12:34 · follows Nicholas Gevers

on 4/9/01 3:25 AM, Nicholas Gevers at vermoulis at yahoo.com wrote:
Adam, thanks for putting the other side's views so plainly and firmly.

To be even more plain and firm, I don't see any evidence that Wolfe was thinking about utopias at all when he wrote TBOTSS. None of the communities Silkhorn encounters is remotely utopian (I don't see any warrant for considering Sinew's village a utopia, and two people living in the wilderness don't count). Silkhorn's statesmanship as Rajan of Gaon is thoroughly pragmatic, as far as we know, with nothing utopian about it. The revolution he leads in Dorp presumably replaces a bad regime with a better one, but it doesn't create a utopia. Nor is the moral advice he ladles out utopian in any sense (saying "be nicer to poor people" doesn't qualify one as a radical reformer, let alone a utopian). And I don't see a shred of evidence that Silkhorn has "nudged" Blue in the direction of utopia. If Wolfe was indeed responding to Robinson's Mars trilogy (which I haven't read), it's more likely that his point was simply "if humans set out to colonize another planet, this mess is what would _really_ happen." (I'm also surprised at your implication that Blue at the time of Silkhorn's return is an Eden.)

Nor, for that matter, does Silkhorn's behavior on Blue strike me as being particularly Christ-like, despite Hoof's description of him as frighteningly good. (The more I think about this description, the more it seems to me like cheating by Wolfe: an attempt to evoke by fiat a reaction that his portrayal of Silkhorn hasn't made us feel.)

--Adam

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 11 Apr 2001, 11:25 · follows Adam Stephanides

Nor, for that matter, does Silkhorn's behavior on Blue strike me as being particularly Christ-like, despite Hoof's description of him as frighteningly good. (The more I think about this description, the more it seems to me like cheating by Wolfe: an attempt to evoke by fiat a reaction that his portrayal of Silkhorn hasn't made us feel.)

Ummmm... I think, maybe, that Mr Wolfe does not _intend_ us to have the reaction to (Hoof'n'Hide's) Silk|Horn* that we had to Horn's Silk.

* Nice formulation, William!

On the other hand, it's interesting how effective the Narr _is_ in dealing with problems in Gaon, in Soldo/Blanko, and in Dorp, apparently by "assuming the virtue," acting to the best of his ability as he believed Silk would act. (I imagine a future generation of Bluvians wearing "WWSD?" buttons.)

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Adam Stephanides — 12 Apr 2001, 11:44 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

on 4/11/01 1:25 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:

Nor, for that matter, does Silkhorn's behavior on Blue strike me as being particularly Christ-like, despite Hoof's description of him as frighteningly good. (The more I think about this description, the more it seems to me like cheating by Wolfe: an attempt to evoke by fiat a reaction that his portrayal of Silkhorn hasn't made us feel.)

Ummmm... I think, maybe, that Mr Wolfe does not _intend_ us to have the reaction to (Hoof'n'Hide's) Silk|Horn* that we had to Horn's Silk.

Do you mean Horn's Silk in TBOTLS, or Silkhorn's (i. e. the narrator's) Silkhorn? It's the latter I was talking about.

And I didn't find either Silkhorn's or Hoof'n'Hide's Silkhorn frighteningly good. (I wouldn't expect Silkhorn to talk about how good he was, of course, but his actions didn't strike me as being frighteningly good.) Truth to tell, I found Silkhorn's disquisitions on morality and the gods more boring than anything else.

--Adam

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 12 Apr 2001, 09:59 · follows Adam Stephanides

Ummmm... I think, maybe, that Mr Wolfe does not _intend_ us to have the reaction to (Hoof'n'Hide's) Silk|Horn* that we had to Horn's Silk.

Do you mean Horn's Silk in TBOTLS, or Silkhorn's (i. e. the narrator's) Silkhorn? It's the latter I was talking about.

I mean the former. Silk|Horn (whether portrayed by the Narr or by Hood & Hife, is (to me, at least) an attractive character but _not_ the terrifyingly good man Silk was: he's far more _human_ than Silk-alone.

As for his "disquisitions," well... I won't go as far as "boring," but they're definitely inferior to those of just-Silk as portrayed by Horn-and-Nettle.

--Dan'l

who wonders if Horn has a brother named Hardart

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.