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In the C.S. Lewis Tradition: Two Short Stories by Anthony Boucher

In the C. S. Lewis Tradition: TWO SHORT STORIES BY ANTHONY BOUCHER

by J.R. Christopher

"Anthony Boucher" was the well-known pseudonym for William Anthony Parker White (1911-1968) — Boucher coming from his maternal grandmother. He once wrote that he chose a pseudonym because "The Library of Congress lists 75 book authors named William White." After getting an M.A. in German from the University of California at Berkeley, Boucher went on to write murder mysteries (seven in the late thirties and early forties), and radio plays (three stories, in collaboration with Denis Green, during the mid-forties), and to edit *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (in collaboration with J. Francis McComas, 1949-1954, and alone, 1954-1958). He also wrote short stories: after a single, parodic story in 1927, he began writing consistently in 1942, between his novels and radio scripts, and continued as least occasional production until 1960. (Two posthumous stories have been published, but they were both written some years earlier.) His later years were largely occupied with his mystery reviews (the "Criminals at Large" column in *The New York Times Book Review*, 1951-1968, as well as other work elsewhere).

Boucher was a Roman Catholic. This in itself is not significant, for there are Catholics of varying degrees of faithfulness and practice. Indeed, Boucher's early fiction could not be used to suggest any deep faith. In his first mystery novel, *The Case of the Seven of Calvary* (1937), despite the religious connotations of the title, the plot concerns a Catholic girl who gets an abortion, who suffers no pangs of guilt over it, and who at the end of the novel is happily married. In Boucher's first science-fiction, "The Barrier" (1942), Christianity has been wiped out in the future.

But Boucher is not fairly represented by these stories. He went on, under the second pseudonym of H. H. Holmes, to create a series of mysteries with a nun, Sister Ursula, as detective: *Nine Times Nine* (1940); *Rocket to the Morgue* (1942); "Coffin Corner" (1943); "The Stripper" (1945); "Vacancy with Corpse" (1946). He also went on to write two religious science-fiction short stories.

The first of these stories is also part of a series, Boucher's "Future History" of Usuforum Robotics — it is the third-published but last in chronological sequence of the stories: "Q.U.R.R." (by H. H. Holmes, 1943); "Robinc" (by H. H. Holmes, 1943); "Secret of the House" (by H. H. Holmes, 1953); "The Quest of St. Aquin" (by Anthony Boucher, 1951). In the latter story, a priest named Thomas is sent on a search for the undecaying body of a religious teacher named Aquin. If the priest can locate the body and confirm the miracle, the Pope will proclaim Aquin a Saint. The setting is after an atomic war, in an America ruled by a Technarchy. Thomas, as he skirts the radioactive area which had been San Francisco, rides a robass (a usuforum robot ass), for roads are poor or non-existent. The quest is successful, after a fashion.

This story, which some believe to be Boucher's outstanding work of short fiction (I would say, of any lengthened fiction), is directly connected to C. S. Lewis by a single allusion. Although the fictional future has united the three major hierarchical churches, the robass comments to Thomas at one point, "Under your own Pope priests of other rites such as the Byzantine and Anglican are free of vows of celibacy." — and so, the Roman Catholic fiction is connected to the Anglican Lewis by more than a reference. But to the allusion. At one point Thomas refuses a temptation suggested by the robass with the words, "You are in very truth the devil, prowling about the world seeking the destruction of man.... You are a purely functional robot constructed and fed to tempt me, and the tape of your data is the tape of Screw-tape."

The second story, "Balaam," appeared three years later, in 1954. It is a future-setting version of the Old Testament story of Balaam and his ass (indeed, Thomas meditated on the same Biblical passage in the previous story), dealing with two Chaplains, Rabbi Chaim Acosta and Father Aloysius Malloy ("Mule" from his football days), with a terran exploration party making, on Mars, its first contact with aliens (although not, oddly enough, with Martians).

The passage which ties the story to Lewis is a conversation between the Chaplains:

"There is an interesting doctrine," said Rabbi Acosta,

"advanced by one of your writers, C.S. Lewis..."

"He was an Episcopalian," said Father Malloy sharply.

"I apologise," Acosta refrained from pointing out that Anglo-Catholic would have been a more accurate term.

"But I believe that many in your church have found his writings, from your point of view, doctrinally sound? He advances the doctrine of what he calls *hnaus* — intelligent beings with souls who are the children of God, whatever their physical shape or planet of origin."

"Look, Chaim," said Malloy with an effort toward patience. "Doctrine or no doctrine, there just aren't any such beings. Not in this solar system, anyway. And if you're going to go interstellar on me, I'd just as soon read the men's micro-comics."

Thus is introduced the concept of the *hnau*, from Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*, and, indeed, although the term itself only reappears once in the story, the concept of what is a child of God, an intelligent being with a soul, is basic to the whole plot.

Two stories. Although it is too early to speak of a Lewisian tradition in science fiction, the literary influence has begun.

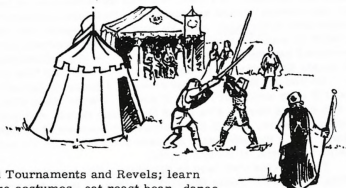
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