

More on Borges and Wolfe's literary bullying

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 26 Aug 1998

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Dan Parmenter — 26 Aug 1998, 08:24

From: CRCulver at aol.com

Peace includes a great deal of Jorge Luis Borges' influence, and seeing it here can illuminate how it was later used in the Book of the New Sun.

One Borgian influence I think is particularly strong is the labyrinthine symbolism of Weer's house (which I'm assuming is part of his postmortem imagination and doesn't actually exist).

I haven't read PEACE yet, but Borges seems to permeate everything that Wolfe writes, moreso I think even than his other big influences (Kipling, Dickens, Jack Vance). Seek out a copy of THE BOOK OF IMAGINARY BEINGS and read the piece about the inhabitants of the specula and the Yellow Emperor and tell me that this isn't essentially a precis of the Book of the New Sun. Interestingly enough, Wolfe calls the book "second-rate Borges" and it is, though it's got some dazzling parts. I believe there are two versions in English. I have the one translated by the controversial Norman Thomas diGiovanni, who despite working closely with Borges has come under a lot of criticism recently for making questionable editorial changes. After seeing a photo of him, I even found myself thinking that he looked a bit like Wolfe's description of Cyby, Ultan's apprentice which might make the Borges/Ultan match even tighter.

One thing I've been thinking about a lot in the midst of my Borges/Wolfe-reading phase is that when I read Borges, I feel smart. When I read Wolfe, I often feel stupid, and only feel smart when I've "solved" (in the Vironese sense?) one of his seemingly locked rooms.

Which brings us to...

From: m.driussi at genie.com

Re: "The Books in THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN," yes, that is an important piece (collected in PLAN[E]T ENGINEERING, published by NESFA, and rather hard to find), but to my mind it leads to an interesting new topic (or rehash) on Wolfe and his readers.

I have a copy. In a better world CASTLE OF THE OTTER would be reworked to include this essential essay. To make room, I would ditch the endless pages of good reviews that Wolfe includes in OTTER. I've never understood their inclusion in the first place, it's almost as if, at the time of writing he was still somewhat unsure of his own talent and needed a bunch of good reviews all in one place to convince that he was indeed.

There's at least one other really great piece in PLAN[E]T ENGINEERING, a short poem about a British gunnery officer contemplating Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. I should type it in, since I doubt anyone will go and sell copies of obscure Wolfe poems found on mailing lists.

There is a similar tidbit in CASTLE OF THE OTTER, where Wolfe starts to sketch the connections linking Dorcas to Severian by way of the cloisonne shop she worked in and the enameled pictures within the holy book he fetched for Thecla--then Wolfe stops in order to leave the task for you to do.

I recall the incredulity that I felt when I first read that, the sense that if I had missed that, then I must be missing a great deal more. And yet, when I feel as though I've made such connections myself, they really do seem obvious, e.g. our recent discussion about Jonas as Pinocchio/The Steadfast Tin Soldier. I'm convinced that we are essentially correct in this assessment and insofar as it seems "obvious" in retrospect, it also suggests many more questions.

Another passage in OTTER presents his summary of the original novella-sized version of what turned into BOTNS. He sets up the situation, outlines the various conflicts and then announces that he has a solution, but that again, he'll leave that as an exercise for the reader; however, the clues are not (IMHO) enough to solve the problem that he presents. It's maddening and again, leaves me feeling like an idiot.

Because it isn't nice to tell the Reader that she is stupid for having missed something "so obvious" when it wasn't really "obvious" at all. And it isn't nice to invite people to interpret Rorschach ink blots, extolling them to elaborate further and further, if your goal (perhaps secret) is to trick and humiliate the participants by revealing what the inkblots "really are."

Here Alan Moore's mantra of "Everything means something, but not everything means much" (wrt WATCHMEN, but I apply it generally to literature "of this sort" i.e. multilayered, ambiguous, full of strange clues, seemingly unrelated story tangents and unlikely cross references) seems appropriate. I think Wolfe does a good job of not letting this stuff get in the way of his story even though one's appreciation of what actually constitutes "the story" deepens as one sees the grand design revealed.

D

CRCulver — 29 Aug 1998, 10:50 · follows Dan Parmenter

Dan Parmenter wrote:

<Interestingly enough, Wolfe calls [the Book of Imaginary Beings] "second-rate Borges" and it is, though it's got some dazzling parts.>

The BoIB is not an example of Borges in his prime. Because he was blind by the time of its writing (like Ultan) he was forced to write it with an assistant who, IMHO, added too much to it. However, the book is wonderful as a non-fiction device. Recently, I was playing a computer game with a animal in it called "Kalja." One glance at the BoIB entry told me all I needed.

And Dan continued:

<One thing I've been thinking about a lot in the midst of my Borges/Wolfe-reading phase is that when I read Borges, I feel smart. When I read Wolfe, I often feel stupid>

I imagine that is because Borges writes his stories in third-person omniscient, and so the reader is told almost everything. Wolfe, OTOH, tends to use first-person a lot, and the narrator doesn't always know what is happening (like Severian in most of the UotNS).

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