

Jaynes and Wolfe

The Urth list — 7 messages, 6 voices, 28 Oct 1998

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1231>

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.

Alice Turner — 29 Oct 1998, 19:46

I think Mothman is really onto something here. Jaynes's book was published in 1979 in the US and caused the most tremendous furor--it was a real whoop-de-do. -Soldier of the Mist- was published in 1986. It seems to me absolutely impossible that Wolfe, in researching these books, should not have read it. And I do think that he borrowed what was useful to him from Jaynes's thesis, not only for the Soldier books but for the relationship between "gods" and men in BOTLS too--almost directly for the former. BOTLS (which I admire more structurally with each contemplation--especially since I don't think Wolfe was strong with structure up to that point) could be read as Wolfe's attempt to integrate Jaynes with his (Wolfe's) new knowledge of computers.

BTW, I don't posit that Wolfe actually *bought* the Jaynes thesis, which has been pretty thoroughly scientifically pooh-poohed, but that it was awfully useful to him as a novelist. Similarly, Martin Bernays's -Black Athena-, which sent historians and archaeologists into fits of sarcasm and frothing at the mouth, might be very useful to a writer like Crowley in his Aegypt series.

Here, picked almost randomly, are a couple of paragraphs from Jaynes:

"The characters of the Iliad do not sit down and think out what to do. they have no conscious minds such as we say we have, and certainly no introspections. It is impossible for us with our subjectivity to appreciate what it was like. When Agamemnon, king of men, robs Achilles of his mistress, it is a god that grabs Achilles by his yellow hair and warns him not to strike Agamemnon. It is a god who then rises out of the gray sea and consoles him in his tears of wrath on the beach by his black ships, a god who whispers low to Helen to sweep her heart with homesick longing, a god who hides Paris in a mist in front of the attacking Menelaus, a god who tells Glaucus to take bronze for gold, a god who leads he armies into battle, who speaks to each soldier at the turning points, who debates and tells Hector what he must do, who urges the soldiers on by casting them in spells or drawing mists over their visual fields. It is the gods who start quarrels among men that really cause the wars and then plan its strategy...In fact the gods take the place of consciousness."

"Who were these gods that pushed men about like robots and sang epics through their lips? They were voices whose speech and directions could be heard as directly by the Iliadic heroes as voices are heard by certain epileptic and schizophrenic patients, or just as Joan of Arc heard her voices. The gods were organizations of the central nervous system and can be regarded as personae in the sense of poignant consistencies through time, amalgams of parental or admonitory images...The gods are what we now call hallucinations. Usually they are only seen and heard by the particular heroes they are speaking to...."

Etc. There's much more to it, on how crowds behave, for instance. Hey, kidz, there's an academic thesis for one of you in this! Note that Jaynsean material is entirely absent in everything Wolfe wrote prior to the Soldier books, and informs everything he has written since.

Interesting, for instance, Silk's blind faith in his Outsider, Mint's bowing to the will of the god. Contrast with Hamlet's caution re the authenticity of the Ghost--which he actually saw. Hamlet is a modern man, Silk and Mint and Latro are archaic. (In my opinion, Wolfe is much, much better with the archaic than when he attempts to be modern, but that, O Best Beloved, is another story.) And Latro's and Auk's head wounds.

Thanks, Mothman, this was fun.

-alga

Alex David Groce — 29 Oct 1998, 20:41 · follows Alice Turner

alga said:

Subject: (urth) Jaynes and Wolfe

I think Mothman is really onto something here. Jaynes's book was published in 1979 in the US and caused the most tremendous furor--it was a real whoop-de-do. -Soldier of the Mist- was published in 1986. It seems to me absolutely impossible that Wolfe, in researching these books, should not have read it. And I do think that he borrowed what was useful to him from Jaynes's thesis, not only for the Soldier books but for the relationship between "gods" and men in BOTLS too--almost directly for the former. BOTLS (which I admire more structurally with each contemplation--especially since I don't think Wolfe was strong with structure up to that point) could be read as Wolfe's attempt to integrate Jaynes with his (Wolfe's) new knowledge of computers.

I think this is a very likely history--especially as Jaynes' hypothesis would have fit in well with Wolfe's suspicions voiced here and there about the "real existence" of the gods--it wouldn't fit precisely, but it would be an excellent model to keep in mind in portraying fictionally the ancient world as Wolfe (maybe) sees it. How much new knowledge of computers is involved in Long Sun, I'm not sure--it seems given Wolfe's general subtle but accurate technical detail, he'd have known most of the concepts involved in BOTLS for a long time. Mainframes, memory, & personality downloading are pretty old ideas... & actually Sillhoutte has some nice computer bits in it (the Overmonitor acts like an old, cranky operating system, or an Infocom game...)

BTW, I don't posit that Wolfe actually *bought* the Jaynes thesis, which has been pretty thoroughly scientifically pooh-poohed, but that it was awfully useful to him as a novelist. Similarly, Martin Bernays's -Black Athena-, which sent historians and archaeologists into fits of sarcasm and frothing at the mouth, might be very useful to a writer like Crowley in his Aegypt series.

Here, picked almost randomly, are a couple of paragraphs from Jaynes:

"The characters of the Iliad do not sit down and think out what to do. they have no conscious minds such as we say we have, and certainly no introspections. It is impossible for us with our subjectivity to appreciate what it was like. When Agamemnon, king of men, robs Achilles of his mistress, it is a god that grabs Achilles by his yellow hair and warns him not to strike Agamemnon. It is a god who then rises out of the gray sea and consoles him in his tears of wrath on the beach by his black ships, a god who whispers low to Helen to sweep her heart with homesick longing, a god who hides Paris in a mist in front of the attacking Menelaus, a god who tells Glaucus to take bronze for gold, a god who leads he armies into battle, who speaks to each soldier at the turning points, who debates and

tells Hector what he must do, who urges the soldiers on by casting them in spells or drawing mists over their visual fields. It is the gods who start quarrels among men that really cause the wars and then plan its strategy...In fact the gods take the place of consciousness."

"Who were these gods that pushed men about like robots and sang epics through their lips? They were voices whose speech and directions could be heard as directly by the Iliadic heroes as voices are heard by certain epileptic and schizophrenic patients, or just as Joan of Arc heard her voices. The gods were organizations of the central nervous system and can be regarded as personae in the sense of poignant consistencies through time, amalgams of parental or admonitory images...The gods are what we now call hallucinations. Usually they are only seen and heard by the particular heroes they are speaking to...."

Definitely sounds like the Soldier books, although I do think Wolfe wants us to at least two-thirds of the way buy into accepting that these deities are real. Not just seem real, but are--similarly, although Wolfe doesn't "cheat" by having the Hand of God nuke the bad guys or something (a la King), the Outsider is plainly meant to be God, in the sense of the real God showing up as a "character" in fiction.

Etc. There's much more to it, on how crowds behave, for instance. Hey, kidz, there's an academic thesis for one of you in this! Note that Jaynsean material is entirely absent in everything Wolfe wrote prior to the Soldier books, and informs everything he has written since.

Interesting, for instance, Silk's blind faith in his Outsider, Mint's bowing to the will of the god. Contrast with Hamlet's caution re the authenticity of the Ghost--which he actually saw. Hamlet is a modern man, Silk and Mint and Latro are archaic. (In my opinion, Wolfe is much, much better with the archaic than when he attempts to be modern, but that, O Best Beloved, is another story.) And Latro's and Auk's head wounds.

Thanks, Mothman, this was fun.

Agreed. I'll have to hunt down Jaynes--I half read part of it some time ago, looking something up, but never actually finished it. As to Wolfe, archaic/modern, I'd agree but note that the "archaic" in Wolfe's sense isn't exactly lacking from the "modern" world. Chesterton's old statement that assigning times and places to ideas is unwise; in the end that particular kinds of thought are more popular at particular times and places says more about those times & places than the ideas... And Wolfe's "Hamlet"ism comes in that he (usually) provides the reader an "out"--a way to say it wasn't a ghost at all... Latro's & Auk's wounds, Dr. Crane's hypothesis, etc. It's clear which "side" Wolfe is on, but he doesn't force that interpretation on the reader. So the Jaynes idea is the Dr. Crane hypothesis to explain everyone who sees a god in Soldier... Probably why Wolfe's easier to digest than somebody like Lewis or Chesterton for those who disagree with the theology, etc.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." - John 8:32

--

Alex David Groce (adgroce at eos.ncsu.edu)
Senior (Computer Science/Multidisciplinary Studies in Technology & Fiction)
'98-99 NCSU AITP Student Chapter President
608 Charleston Road, Apt. 1E (919)-233-7366
<http://www4.ncsu.edu/~adgroce>

CRCulver — 30 Oct 1998, 01:49 · follows Alex David Groce

Alga wrote:

<Interesting, for instance, Silk's blind faith in his Outsider>

But Wolfe has said that the Outsider is "a spiritual god," which to me means the Outsider is the Pancreator.

<the relationship between "gods" and men in BOTLS too--almost directly for the former. BOTLS (which I admire more structurally with each contemplation--especially since I don't think Wolfe was strong with structure up to that point) could be read as Wolfe's attempt to integrate Jaynes with his (Wolfe's) new knowledge of computers.>

I should mention that there is another book inspired by Jaynes' book, though very different from Gene Wolfe. It is Neal Stephenson's Snow Crash, which is a hilarious sort of cross between a cyberpunk novel and a satire of that genre. It would be interesting reading for Wolfe fans with time on their hands, 'cause you can compare what Stephenson did to Wolfe's interpretation.

<BTW, I don't posit that Wolfe actually *bought* the Jaynes thesis, which has been pretty thoroughly scientifically pooh-poohed>

My acquaintances in the mental sciences (psychology, psycholinguistics, psychaitry) have informed me that the book is 90% crap, but that's in accordance with Sturgeon's Law. When I read the book, I enjoyed its entertaining qualities, and didn't believe a word of it. Still, Jaynes was Professor of Psychology at Princeton, so he's no crackpot.

<Contrast with Hamlet's caution re the authenticity of the Ghost>

Y'know, I was reading Hamlet the other day, and I found a strong influence on Wolfe in it, and now I've totally forgotten it. Hopefully it'll come again. I think I've yet to post the (rather obvious, to me) link to Macbeth in SotT.

Christopher R. Culver <crculver at aol.com>
<http://members.aol.com/crculver/index.html>

Kieran Cleary — 28 Oct 1998, 09:38 · follows CRCulver

Alga wrote:

Similarly, Martin Bernays's -Black Athena-,

which sent historians and archaeologists into fits of sarcasm and frothing at the mouth, might be very useful to a writer like Crowley in his Aegypt series.<

If I'm allowed a wee tangent, what's the news on Crowley, anyone? Given that Love&Sleep wasn't even published in the UK, and that it's probably out of print already, I have this fear that the Aegypt sequence won't get completed. Anyone got any pointers to recent interviews or other hopeful news?

Kieran C.

North West Labs
Finisklin Industrial Estate
Sligo
Republic of Ireland

Tel. +353 71 69441

Fax. +353 71 69451
email: kieranwn at tinet.ie

Michael Straight — 30 Oct 1998, 08:56 · follows Kieran Cleary

On Thu, 29 Oct 1998 CRCulver at aol.com wrote:

Alga wrote:

<Interesting, for instance, Silk's blind faith in his Outsider>

But Wolfe has said that the Outsider is "a spiritual god," which to me means the Outsider is the Pancreator.

There's a big difference between Wolfe telling us that he personally interprets the Outsider as a real "spiritual god" and the narrative forcing that conclusion upon us. One of the best things about many of Wolfe's stories is that it's possible to read them with purely materialistic presuppositions or with Wolfe's religious ones. It's very gentlemanly of him.

In contrast, try reading C.S. Lewis's Space Trilogy and explaining the events materialistically.

-Rostrum

Michael Straight — 30 Oct 1998, 09:14 · follows Michael Straight

On Thu, 29 Oct 1998, Alice Turner wrote:

"The characters of the Iliad do not sit down and think out what to do. they have no conscious minds such as we say we have, and certainly no introspections....

[...]

...The gods are what we now call hallucinations. Usually they are only seen and heard by the particular heroes they are speaking to...."

Etc. There's much more to it, on how crowds behave, for instance. Hey, kidz, there's an academic thesis for one of you in this! Note that Jaynsean material is entirely absent in everything Wolfe wrote prior to the Soldier books, and informs everything he has written since.

Interesting, for instance, Silk's blind faith in his Outsider, Mint's bowing to the will of the god. Contrast with Hamlet's caution re the authenticity of the Ghost--which he actually saw. Hamlet is a modern man, Silk and Mint and Latro are archaic. (In my opinion, Wolfe is much, much better with the archaic than when he attempts to be modern, but that, O Best Beloved, is another story.) And Latro's and Auk's head wounds.

I'm missing something here. How exactly do you see Wolfe being influenced by Jaynes as opposed to the Iliad itself? Are you saying he gets the idea that theophonies might be hallucinations from Jaynes? Surely Jaynes wasn't the first to suggest that. Are you disagreeing with the earlier posts noting that the gods do not act for Latro or Silk as the kind of proto-consciousness Jaynes describes?

Are you just saying that archaic people believed in gods but modern people are more skeptical? (I'm not sure even that much is true.)

-Rostrum

Kevin J. Maroney — 02 Nov 1998, 19:45 · follows Michael Straight

At 07:46 PM 10/29/98 -0500, alga quoted Julian Jaynes:

"The characters of the Iliad do not sit down and think out what to do. they have no conscious minds such as we say we have, and certainly no introspections."

By complete coincidence, I just happened to be reading part of *The Iliad* only a couple of weeks back--I'd never read it before; quite interesting--and I can say that this is, as a categorical statement, false. The death of Hector provides a clear example of introspection: (From Samuel Butler's translation, Book XXII)

"Alas," said he to himself in the heaviness of his heart, "if I go within the gates, Polydamas will be the first to heap reproach upon me, for it was he that urged me to lead the Trojans back to the city on that awful night when Achilles again came forth against us. I would not listen, but it would have been indeed better if I had done so. Now that my folly has destroyed the host, I dare not look Trojan men and Trojan women in the face, lest a worse man should say, 'Hector has ruined us by his self-confidence.' Surely it would be better for me to return after having fought Achilles and slain him, or to die gloriously here before the city. What, again, if were to lay down my shield and helmet, lean my spear against the wall and go straight up to noble Achilles? What if I were to promise to give up Helen, who was the fountainhead of all this war, and all the treasure that Alexandrus brought with him in his ships to Troy, aye, and to let the Achaeans divide the half of everything that the city contains among themselves? I might make the Trojans, by the mouths of their princes, take a solemn oath that they would hide nothing, but would divide into two shares all that is within the city- but why argue with myself in this way? Were I to go up to him he would show me no kind of mercy; he would kill me then and there as easily as though I were a woman, when I had off my armour. There is no parleying with him from some rock or oak tree as young men and maidens prattle with one another. Better fight him at once, and learn to which of us Jove will vouchsafe victory."
Thus did he stand and ponder....

And it's not a God who put this dilemma into Hector's heart; quite the contrary, Apollo cautioned Hector not to stand and fight Achilles, as did his parents. But he stands stupidly awaiting Achilles, torn between honor, cowardice, pride, and good sense: as modern a scene as one is likely to see.

Kevin Maroney | Crossover Technologies
kmaroney at crossover.com | (212) 777-1190