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The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 03 Nov 1998

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Alice Turner — 03 Nov 1998, 08:45

From: "Kevin J. Maroney" <kmaroney at crossover.com>

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)

[snip]

Oh, I agree, and could easily find other examples, even from Gilgamesh. (Why are you reading Butler, btw, did you download it? There are some splendid more modern translations. Did you know that Butler, and Graves after him, was convinced that The Odyssey was written by a woman?) But there is a certain very general argument that could be sustained or at least argued over in the Jaynes premise. I'll say again that I believe that Wolfe is at his best when dealing with rather flat "archaic" figures, that in my own opinion he is less successful at the nuanced 3-dimensional "modern" figure.

-alga

Kevin J. Maroney — 03 Nov 1998, 10:49 · follows Alice Turner

At 08:45 AM 11/3/98 -0500, alga wrote:

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The Butler was available online. I actually can't remember what translation I was reading when I first encountered this scene; I read it in WH Auden's _The Greek Classics_ (Viking Portable Library).

But there is a certain very general argument that could be sustained or at least argued over in the Jaynes premise.

I certainly understand; but Jaynes was making an absolute categorical statement, and like any absolute categorical statement, a single counterexample damages it. (Harold Bloom seems to make a similarly broad and indefensible statement in his newest book on Shakespeare.)

I'll say again that I believe that Wolfe is at his best when dealing with rather flat "archaic" figures, that in my own opinion he is less successful at the nuanced 3-dimensional "modern" figure.

Interesting observation, and one that I simultaneously find quite correct and want to argue with. Alden Weir is a brilliant 3-dimensional figure, but other than that, the characters in his best stories do tend to be viewed at a remove.

Wombat, a.k.a. Kevin Maroney kmaroney at crossover.com Kitchen Staff Supervisor, New York Review of Science Fiction <http://ebbs.english.vt.edu/olp/nyrsf/nyrsf.html>

Alex David Groce — 03 Nov 1998, 12:57 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

Wombat said:

I'll say again that I believe that Wolfe is at his best when dealing with rather flat "archaic" figures, that in my own opinion he is less successful at the nuanced 3-dimensional "modern" figure.

Interesting observation, and one that I simultaneously find quite correct and want to argue with. Alden Weir is a brilliant 3-dimensional figure, but other than that, the characters in his best stories do tend to be viewed at a remove.

Perhaps a better way to put it would be that a lot of Wolfe's best characters have a very different psychology than you generally find in modern literature--Severian comes to mind, of course, but Latro fits the bill as well. I don't think Severian is so much "flat" as extended in a different manner--where a modern character has depth, Severian does indeed seem flat.

However, Severian's memory and ability to tune in to what I guess I would call a sacramental view of reality replaces this; he does not agonize over decisions because he is doing something else. Latro works the same way (his lack of memory serving the same kind of function as Sev's abundance thereof).

Weir is, to my mind, the most complex of Wolfe's characters--with both the psychological depth of a "modern man" and the labyrinthine memory of a Severian (Weir's being, presumably, less "true" but equally involved.) I'd say Weir's closest parallel is the narrator in Remembrance of Things Past--completely different kinds of books, with very different concerns, but a similar unique kind of character.

Of course, I'd say that it's more that Wolfe emphasizes certain kinds of psychology that aren't prevalent in modern literature (or recognized by us moderns in general, although still extant) than that he can't handle the kinds usually seen--I think Weir's proof of that.

Silk I see as more "modern" than Severian, but also akin to Myshkin or (what I thought of when I started the book) Aloysha in The Brothers Karamazov... An Aloysha, a Father Brown, a "little Christ", and a bit of Moses (so is Auk Aaron?). Hey, that's actually a nice point. Moses never got to the promised land either! The book is "Exodus," after all. Of course, Blue & Green don't seem to be the land of milk and honey, but then the Israelites were being given the one nation in the region without oil supplies. So, if Silk is Moses-like, what's his disobedience that prevents arrival in the promised land? Or is this an intentional contrast, where it's his loyalty (to Hy) that prevents it, making him both Moses-like and Christic in self-sacrifice for (a less than Godlike but still touching) love?

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

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