

Wright Rebuttal

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 16 Dec 1998

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Nigel Price — 16 Dec 1998, 19:29

(Sorry, there is some lupine comment in this posting, but there's a bit of scene setting to be got through as well first...)

I recently sent off to America for Mantis' splendid collection of lupine booklets. He responded very quickly to my order, and the booklets arrived here in Wiltshire, England, in yesterday's post. Since then I have been studying them with a great deal of pleasure, and accordingly decided to write an e-mail to Mantis to thank him for being willing to share his scholarship with other Wolfe enthusiasts in this way.

My message began as follows:

Hi Michael!

Just to let you know that your consignment of Gene Wolfe booklets arrived safely in yesterday's post and I've been greedily devouring their contents ever since. Thank you for making the fruits of your long labours available to others in this way.

I was particularly impressed by your synopsis of TBotNS and TUotNS. Reading it all through brought back a little of the sheer joy and wonder of Wolfe's convoluted, and, indeed, involuted narrative. Time and again, my reaction was something along the lines of, "So *that's* what happened - that's what I *thought* happened, but it seemed so strange that at the time I read it that I wondered whether I'd misunderstood!"

I have recently been corresponding with <very kind and scholarly member of the Urth and Whorl lists> and he has been kind enough to send me copies of various reviews and critical essays on Wolfe, and amongst these was a copy of your piece in Foundation 66, entitled "Gene Wolfe at the Lake of Birds". I very much enjoyed reading this, and found your tracing of the various interwoven references and allusions in "The Shadow of the Torturer" most illuminating.

In contrast, I found the two extracts from Peter Wright's thesis on Wolfe that were published in the same edition of Foundation much more problematic...

Ever prompt, Mantis replied this evening as follows:

Thanks for all your comments on "Lake of Birds" and Peter Wright's essays! Please consider posting them to the list, especially the Wright stuff, since more-than-you-might-guess have read those essays (and =everybody= should have a copy of "Foundation No. 66," yet without a doubt there are some who know not of its existence) and who knows, they might be prodded into coughing up some sort of dialog.

Since you've already done the writing it is easy to upload, and you can share your work.

OK, this is what I wrote:

In contrast (to Mantis' essay on The Lake of Birds), I found the two extracts from Peter Wright's thesis on Wolfe that were published in the same edition of Foundation much more problematic. Although there was much to admire, especially, for instance, in his discussion of the way that Severian's "perfect" memory serves to overwhelm significant information with an excess of circumstantial and associative detail, I was ultimately unconvinced by his theory that the book is a disguised account of a cosmic evolutionary conspiracy. Clearly, he is right to emphasise the role of the hierogrammates and their plans as shaping forces behind many of the events of Severian's narrative, and I agree that the references to plays and puppetry throughout the narrative are highly suggestive of the covert manipulation going on.

For all that, Wright's analysis seems far too reductive. In stressing Severian's suitability for becoming the progenitor of the New Sun because the hieros produced the hierogrammates by "torturing" other species, he seems to ignore the fact that Severian was a failure as a torturer. That, after all, was why he was exiled from his guild in the first place. His life is characterised by humanity as well as rigour, and surely it is this balance that ultimately qualifies him for both the office of Autarch and his ultimate destiny as bringer of the New Sun.

Again, Wright correctly emphasises that the coming of the New Sun results in Urth's destruction through inundation, but ignores both the terminal decadence and decline of Urth society and the fact that it is in any case doomed to imminent extinction anyway when the old sun finally dies, as the view of the "Ragnarok" timeline from the Last House makes clear. Wolfe has spoken in interviews of Urth's decline as brought about

by a failure of ambition, energy and moral courage.
Urth of the Commonwealth is a society in the grip of social as well as physical entropy.

Wright's interpretation of Severian's story is that it shows how religious and mythological narrative and imagery are cynically exploited by an alien race who use Severian as their puppet and destroy Urth in order to ensure their own creation. I would say that the narrative is much more ambiguous than that. Part of Wolfe's achievement seems to be to show how religious and mythological structures can be embodied in rational structures of physical cause and effect without losing their mythical or religious significance. If Severian ensures the existence of the hierogrammates, he does also save the Urth from heat death and extinction. If the "second coming" of the Conciliator is the result of time travel, then it is still a real parousia, and genuinely results in a judgement and the effective creation of a new heaven and a new earth - or "Urth".

<Spoiler warning for anyone who has not yet read the Long Sun series!>

In so far as Wolfe's other works can, as Wright asserts, be regarded as commentaries on Severian's story, then it seems significant that in the Long Sun books, while Silk discovers that the religion that is so important to him is as manufactured as the world/Whorl in which he lives, he also receives enlightenment from The Outsider, who may well be the "real" God of Christian belief. The Book of the Long Sun is about a false and corrupt religion and its use to manipulate the populace who form the Whorl's "cargo". But it is also about real faith, and Silk's role in "saving" his people and bringing them to a better place. The mythical and the literal themes exist in constant juxtaposition, but rather than subvert each other, they reinforce one another. In Wolfe's fiction, reality is shot through with the significance that it gains from its mythic resonances, while those same myths are in some sense realized and fulfilled in the everyday events of the narrative.

That's certainly how I regard The Book and The Urth of the New Sun.

Stressing the obfuscatory role of Severian's memory also fails to give credit to the sheer power of the naturalistic dimension of Wolfe's narrative. I've always found his attention to describing the small and most mundane details of ordinary life deeply moving and strangely humane amongst much that is often alien and bizarre in

the extreme.

To all this, Mantis commented:

Wright's work is good. I think I agree with you in differing with his vision of the whole, and in some details, but he presents it well and backs up everything with text (which means our differences of opinion often arise out of the vexing morass of "interpretation"). He seems to steer the Urth Cycle into the Machievellian territory of Herbert's DUNE series (but maybe that only came to mind because there was an essay in the same issue about Herbert's Machievellian themes!) rather than, say, the PK Dick region of "Gnostic Truth breaks through."

(Oh look, another Synchronicity Wave is breaking-- vizcacha is suddenly talking about Clute's "Catherine the Weal"--good time to act, now.)

Plus you really ought to post a list of your recent readings in essays on Wolfe, just to spread the info on what is there, and help prod those people (other than myself, honestly!) who desire to compile annotated bibliographies of secondary material.

Keep up the good work!

Thus encouraged, therefore, I have posted the above for general consideration, and give my recent lupine reading as follows, with due thanks to generous photocopiers of reviews and articles (they know who they are!):

Mantis' (Michael Andre-Driussi) "Lexicon Urthus" and three individual pamphlet volumes of "Additions, Errata &cetera"; his indispensable "Synopsis of the Narrative of Severian the Great"; his two booklets "Languages of the Long Sun Whorl" and "Characters of the Long Sun Whorl"

Colin Greenland's review of "The Shadow of the Torturer" and "The Claw of the Conciliator" in Foundation 24.

Douglas Barbour's review of "The Sword of the Lictor" in Foundation 26.

Paul Park's review of "Nightside the Long Sun" and "Lake of the Long Sun" in Foundation 60.

Michael Andre-Driussi's essay (Mantis again!) "Gene Wolfe at the Lake of Birds" in Foundation 66.

Peter Wright's essays "God-Games: Cosmic Conspiracies and Narrative Sleights in Gene Wolfe's The Fictions of the New Sun" and "Grasping the

God-Games: Metafictional Keys to the Interpretation of Gene Wolfe's *The Fictions of the New Sun*" in *Foundation* 66.

John Clute's collected essays on Gene Wolfe in his book *"Strokes"*

Larry McCaffery's essay and interview with Gene Wolfe in *"Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers"*

And, newly arrived from Amazon this morning...
"Gene Wolfe: Urth-Man Extraordinary: A Working Bibliography by Phil Stephensen-Payne and Gordon Benson, Jr."

I've also been downloading various interviews and articles from the web, but I need to compile a separate list for them. The "Cave Canem" site has been a fascinating source of essays and lexicographical information on *"The Fifth Head of Cerberus"*.

Regards

Nigel Price
Minety, Wiltshire
England