

Wolfe's textual Catholicism

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 25 Apr 1999

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Nicholas Gevers — 25 Apr 1999, 05:29

In response to Ori Kowarsky's interesting and emphatic recent posting, denying any necessary religious reading of Wolfe's work: Certainly many different interpretations of Wolfe, religious or secular, are sustainable; but some difficulties arise with an insistent secular approach:

1) Wolfe's known Catholicism is ignored: the major flaw in Peter Wright's Wolfe articles.

2) The logic I've cited previously is ignored: as a Catholic writer, Wolfe feels free to be very catholic in his deployment of literary and symbolic materials. As Catholic missionaries have done over centuries

- incorporating "foreign" rituals, beliefs, and philosophies into the Christian mix as additional masks that God may wear - so Wolfe adopts Darwinian, Hindu, and other components into his texts, as conveniences of garb, serving the still Christian purposes of God and author. In the process, the "foreign" elements serve Christianity, and so are deprived of their original, non-Christian force. This is the essence of parody, the literary technique at which Wolfe excels: the borrowing of cultural forms in order to use them in capacities utterly opposed to their customary ones.

3) The secular emphasis ignores the PROCESSES of religious belief: in particular, Faith.

Expanding a point made in my posting of a couple of days ago: I recently remarked to Peter Cash that Wolfe's texts are, in a lit-crit sense, analogues of Faith: that is, they show us a world of apparent darkness, of countless clashing signs, but a subtle divine pattern is there to be discerned if we are willing (and able); this is how one comes to Faith. This is not easy: one can spend many years teasing out Wolfe's meanings; and Wolfe, a deeply perverse writer, presents us with apparent paradoxes, such as a creator God who is willing to remake the world (Urth) by exterminating its people, whom He made in the first place. But Catholicism has always been capable of perversity, and of reflecting the cruelties of the Christian concept (martyrs, the Inquisition, etc.) //----- Nicholas Gevers potto at webmail.co.za

Alex David Groce — 25 Apr 1999, 12:15 · follows Nicholas Gevers

On Apr 25, 7:29am, Nicholas Gevers wrote:

Subject: (urth) Wolfe's textual Catholicism

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2) The logic I've cited previously is ignored: as a Catholic writer, Wolfe feels free to be very catholic in his deployment of literary and symbolic materials. As Catholic missionaries have done over centuries - incorporating "foreign" rituals, beliefs, and philosophies into the Christian mix as additional masks that God may wear - so Wolfe adopts Darwinian, Hindu, and other components into his texts, as conveniences of garb, serving the still Christian purposes of God and author. In the process, the "foreign" elements serve Christianity, and so are

deprived of their original, non-Christian force. This is the essence of parody, the literary technique at which Wolfe excels: the borrowing of cultural forms in order to use them in capacities utterly opposed to their customary ones.

3) The secular emphasis ignores the PROCESSES of religious belief: in particular, Faith. Expanding a point made in my posting of a couple of days ago: I recently remarked to Peter Cash that Wolfe's texts are, in a lit-crit sense, analogues of Faith: that is, they show us a world of apparent darkness, of countless clashing signs, but a subtle divine pattern is there to be discerned if we are willing (and able); this is how one comes to Faith. This is not easy: one can spend many years teasing out Wolfe's meanings; and Wolfe, a deeply perverse writer, presents us with apparent paradoxes, such as a creator God who is willing to remake the world (Urth) by exterminating its people, whom He made in the first place. But Catholicism has always been capable of perversity, and of reflecting the cruelties of the Christian concept (martyrs, the Inquisition, etc.)

Or to put it differently, Wolfe reflects the paradoxes of the God of the Cross. It's not that it's impossible to interpret BOTNS in a purely materialistic light, as a commentary on colonialism or what-not, but it's surely ignoring the form and patterns of many of the events. When an avowedly Catholic writer writes a book that contains what are clearly versions of events portrayed in the Gospels, and even titles the first chapter "Death and Resurrection," surely the burden of proof in offering convincing interpretations is in the lap of purely secular readings. It is a case, in part, of "separating what you want to see from what is actually there." But if there's a strong indication the author wanted it to be there too, that does tend to create "more privileged" readings. Joyce's ULYSSES could be read without examining the parody of the Odyssey, but it probably isn't the preferred way of looking at it.

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

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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>

Michael Straight — 26 Apr 1999, 10:09 · follows Alex David Groce

On Sun, 25 Apr 1999, Nicholas Gevers wrote:

In response to Ori Kowarsky's interesting and emphatic recent posting, denying any necessary religious reading of Wolfe's work:

Certainly many different interpretations of Wolfe, religious or secular, are sustainable; but some difficulties arise with an insistently secular approach:

1) Wolfe's known Catholicism is ignored: the major flaw in Peter Wright's Wolfe articles.

Using the author's biography and alleged intent to interpret a novel can be interesting, but I prefer interpretations that stand on their own support from the text.

You may end up dismissing some interesting questions if you assume that because Wolfe is Catholic, Tzad is an angel and therefore a good guy.

I really agreed with Alex's observation, that while the text of Wolfe's books have me pretty convinced that Tzad is an angel, that the Outsider really enlightened Silk, etc., I'm not absolutely sure. I can enjoy thinking through a "secular" interpretation of the book. And, for me, it only ruins it if Wolfe says in an interview, "the Outsider is real."

So I think it's much more interesting to try reading through the book and seeing if Ori's secular interpretation can be sustained (or if, as I suspect, it leaves too much unexplained) than to just dismiss it by saying, "Wolfe is Catholic."

-Rostrum

Nicholas Gevers — 29 Apr 1999, 05:01 · follows Michael Straight

In response to Ori Kowarsky's recent defence of his non-Christian reading of the Urth Cycle: eloquently argued, Ori, but I detect a major inconsistency in your posting. Initially, you describe the Christian allusions in BOTNS as detritus from past ages, part of the eclectic symbolic soup of Wolfe's posthistory; then, you maintain that there's no sign that Christ has been present in Severian's universe, that Christian salvation can apply there, etc. But surely the survival of Christian iconography and theology into Severian's age means that Christianity has been present on Urth, but has faded into abeyance over time? There is plenty of textual evidence to support the existence of the Bible as a text familiar in some respects to the people and hierodules of Briah: the presence of Christian missionaries who can read from Exodus in the Jungle Garden; copious references to Genesis in Dr. Talos's Play; the fact that the religion of Typhon's time was analogous to Catholicism, and as such parodied by the gods of the Whorl in LONG SUN. Surely, Severian is a reiteration of a messianic pattern encountered previously on Urth or Earth, not only in Apu-Punchau and the Conciliator, but also in Christ. As for the Urth Cycle not enacting the pattern of Revelations, etc.: how literally should Biblical prophecies be taken? In any case, as I've argued previously, the God described by Wolfe is a highly perverse being, at least from a mortal perspective; His Plan is vast and complicated, entailing cruel manipulation of humanity, to the point of genocide; in my view, the Increate's behaviour is a warning to the reader that the actions of God (and his counterpart the Author) are best not taken for granted. If Severian's cosmos is not ours, it emanates from the same Creator, and any variations it presents on the pattern of our universe are deliberate and elegant, if often inscrutable, variations performed by that Artist. //----- Nicholas Gevers
potto at webmail.co.za