

Earth to Urth Pt 2: Realism and Modernism

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 06 May 1999

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Nigel Price — 06 May 1999, 19:59

As punishment for the dreadful video that I sent him (and various other oddities, including a copy of William Hope Hodgson's "The Night Land" - didn't Hodgson get a mention round here recently?), Jonathan Laidlow very kindly sent me some wonderful SF paperbacks, and a copy of Joan Gordon's interesting "Starmont Reader's Guide" to the works of Gene Wolfe.

Being the verbose sort of windbag that I am, I could resist commenting to him on the chapters that I had read so far...

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I'm enjoying the Joan Gordon book on Wolfe very much at the moment, and find much of what she says very helpful. On the other hand, she seems to miss some crucial things in Wolfe's writing, with the result that her conclusions, interesting in themselves, sometimes still fall short of the mark. For instance, her failure to spot the possibility that the narrator of "Peace" may in fact be dead certainly undermines her otherwise helpful discussion of that book. (I'm not saying that the narrator's death is obvious, and I wasn't sure when I read "Peace" for the first time, but it was at least one of the possibilities that I considered, given some of the clues that we are given.)

Her chapter on "Operation Ares" is balanced and perceptive, but I really do think that there are some important points that she misses, and that the book is not quite so unsubtle as she implies, for all that it is, undeniably, an apprentice work. The Hunters cult is shown to be completely bogus, with a tame lion being manipulated in what is nothing short of a stage illusion - and yet... And yet, when the lion first appears, suddenly, on the street below, while the hero is up on the roof, trying to save a hostage from the clutches of an armed psychotic, it really is like a sign from God. The arrival of the lion tips the balance, and although the hostage taker falls to his death, his hostage escapes (if I remember correctly), and the hero survives (just!).

So, on the one hand, the phenomenology of religion is undermined, because science can always reproduce or explain the outward and physical signs of the allegedly divine, while on the other hand the possibility remains that even the most debased, artificial and flawed religious cult may still, almost by "accident", reflect something of the glory of God, or, possibly, be used for purposes greater than their own. I think understanding this is absolutely key in grappling with the implied theology of the B/UotNS, where the machinery of the New Sun's arrival is explicitly shown to be a cosmic "conspiracy" by self-interested aliens, but where the possibility remains that it may still serve a greater, divine, purpose.

By the way, the business of science replicating the phenomenology of religion, which is central to the science fictional rationale of Severian's story, is essentially a special application of Clarke's Law that any science of sufficient sophistication will be indistinguishable from magic to those who don't understand it. Wolfe's subtle addition is to insist on the possibility that all

science may still be magical.

If I can organize myself, I may write something to the list to "refute" (!) your assertion of Wolfe's alleged modernism, or, at least, to qualify it somewhat. My argument - just so that you are pre-warned - would probably rely partly on the importance of the Dickensian fictional "autobiography" as a formal model for TB/UotNS (thus establishing its essentially pre-modernist roots), and partly on the "humanity" of Severian's narrative, in which poor, ordinary, and suffering individuals all play a prominent and memorable part. A great part of the novel's emotional impact, in my view, comes from the contrast between the very real personal tragedies and sorrows of Urth's inhabitants and the vast cosmic backdrop which gradually unfolds behind them. We see heaven and we see hell, or their close science fictional equivalents, we meet aliens and angels and we travel through time from the distant past to the remote future, but at the end of it all I for one am haunted by my recollection of small, precisely depicted individuals, living out their lives as best they can amidst the ruins and in the face of oncoming disaster... Severian himself as a small boy, sneaking off school to go swimming in the river... The leper in the shanty in the favelas of Thrax... Dorcas, weeping amidst the ruins of the deserted quarter of Nessus.

I appreciate that your formal objection to an overly realist interpretation of the text rests on the undeniable use that Wolfe makes of an unreliable and subjective narrator, rather than an omniscient authorial voice, but some may, perhaps unfairly, have seen this as implying either a lack of substance in the picture we are given of the dying Urth and her inhabitants, or a lack of true sympathy for their plight. On the contrary, Severian's memoriousness ensures a vivid and highly detailed picture of the world in which he grew up, while his cool gaze gives us an unsentimental but far from unsympathetic portrait of human suffering.

With all its eccentrics and grotesques, it is in many ways a very Dickensian approach - provided we confine ourselves to the Dickens of "Great Expectations" and the other novels of his full literary maturity.

Footnote:

Joan Gordon picks up on the importance of embedded stories in "Peace" without quite pushing the idea to its logical conclusion. Wolfe seems very interested in what I might call the Magic of the Americas. At some level, that magic resides in the remembered, imaginary, and imaginative stories of its peoples, and I think that the imported folk tales of America's ethnic minorities, as included in "Peace", form a vital part of the magic substratum of the American consciousness.

It's like the faeries of Europe coming to Illinois in "Castlevue", or the dimly remembered myths of Urth that persist in the much altered South America of Severian's Commonwealth. For Wolfe, the Americas are haunted by stories, and technological wonder tales are part of the United States' particular contribution to this repository of fable.

I love the ghost story at the end of "Peace" that is set in the orange juice factory, and regard it as a perfect paradigm of Wolfe's life and art, combining as it does his experience as a working process engineer and his unquenchable sense of the mystic, the eldritch and the marvellous.

Did I mention in my earlier post that I think the lion-led Cult of the Hunters in "Operation Ares" is part satire on Aslan and Lewis' allegories of Narnia?

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Carry On Torturer: Bernard Bresslaw IS Baldanders!