

The Mysteries of Gene Wolfe/"The Science in Science-Fiction"

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 25 Oct 1999

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Alex David Groce — 25 Oct 1999, 11:33

Robert Aickman's collection COLD HAND IN MINE (which I strongly recommend to all Lupines) opens with a quotation from Sacheverell Sitwell's "For Want of the Golden City": "In the end it is the mystery that lasts and not the explanation."

When Wolfe tells us less than everything we want to know he is at his best.

The few works in which everything can be explained (away) are, in my opinion, his least successful. His best works are all saturated by mysteries, some solvable by diligent study of the text, some forever perplexing: PEACE, BOTNS, BOTLS, "Seven American Nights," 5HC, the Soldier books, "Forlesen," etc. Occasionally, Wolfe fails--CASTLEVIEW is the most notable example, where the mysteries endure only as a vague "What the heck was that all about? I got the Arthur bits, and G. Gordon Liddy, but..." But usually it is precisely this "frustrating" narrative coyness that keeps us hooked--and, when the mysteries extend beyond the last page, keep the story alive in our minds forever. Had Wolfe ended BOTNS with "and by the way Severian went and got a new sun and everything was ok" or had URTH been anything so simple as that, we would have rightly reevaluated the beauty and importance of what went before. By providing us just enough solution to construct the story in our own heads and slowly fill in the blank spots of this map but not enough to eradicate the last land marked "Here Be Dragons" or "The Edge of the World" Wolfe manages to create fictions that mirror the knowable but fundamentally mysterious nature of experienced reality. In a sense this is fundamental to all story-telling--the essence of story is to ask "and what happened next?" and (sometimes forgotten, and hardly present in some stories--the latest John Grisham novel, etc.) "what did that mean?" The second asked, at least initially, not as literary criticism or symbolic explanation, but within the context of the story--the hero has a dream, what does this dream portend for the story? Why does the hero have to kill his father? The only story that evades mystery is the one that tells us the ending on the first page, which, of course, in a way Wolfe does in BOTNS! Wolfe simply raises this art ok keeping the reader (listener) going to very high levels indeed, by making us (even after he has quit "speaking") ask these questions.

It may be that if time-travel does exist, it works somewhat as described in BOTNS. A recent NOVA (that came on when I was expecting Fawlty Towers) had interviews with various pontificating physicists about wormholes, black holes, and other SFnal physics, leading up to time-travel. The new kink (at least for me) was that some physicists, at least the one NOVA was talking to, are now using something that sounds remarkably like fixed-point theory to get rid of paradoxes in time-travel.

Fixed-point theory is used in many areas of computer science to mathematically define self-referential functions and data structures. The idea is that if you keep plugging in the current approximation for the recursively-defined thing in the definition then simplifying this and using it as the new definition, eventually (under certain conditions--there are "least" and "greatest" fixed points which are usually the well-defined ones) you will hit upon a solution that does not change when you plug it in to the definition. A simple example: Set $S = \{x \text{ such that either } (1) x = 1 \text{ or } (2) x / 2 \text{ is an element of } S\}$. If we initially set "S" to some group of integers 1-n, the

fixed-point will be just those integers that are powers of 2.

The time-travel idea is that whenever a paradox shows up, "nature" does the same thing, iterating until a self-consistent solution to the time-travel interactions arises. The show used billiard-balls to demonstrate this, then various talking heads said "it gets more complicated if you introduce free-will and human actions, of course," but the implication was that it still made sense.

So, perhaps it IS good physics that in BOTNS Severian succeeds because in the future he did succeed and so the New Sun is on its way, helping him perform the various "miracles" that he needs to perform to bring the New Sun. Had he failed completely the "first time" it might have been a consistent solution, but once he succeeded at all, the lock was in and he was pulled up, in classic time-travel fashion, by his own previous bootstraps.

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

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