

Modernism

The Urth list — 14 messages, 7 voices, 26 Oct 1999

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Daniel Fusch — 26 Oct 1999, 07:24

OK, now that I've confused myself as to who has posted which messages, I'll address this reply to alga.

alga,

I agree with several things you said.

I think Wolfe's work is likely to last into the next century, although it is unlikely that he will receive much in the way of critical attention for some time to come. I think the work of writers like Walter A. Miller, Jr., Ray Bradbury, and Ursula K. LeGuin will also last into posterity, since they are also authors who experiment with different forms of storytelling. These authors are also--incidentally--taught in today's college lit classes.

And I think it very likely that some of the science fiction "classics" will last as "relics" of the past...at least for a little while. For example, Asimov's "Foundation" is probably here to stay, whether or not we agree with its "literary merit" (if such a thing can be defined), since that work defined a generation of speculative literature. Certain films--"Things to Come" and "2001: A Space Odyssey"--will be a matter of speculation throughout the ages; "Things to Come" remains a frequent film for British lit courses even sixty years after its first appearance.

I should add, though, that I think these relics remain because people like to read/watch them, not simply because they supply us with information about the literary/historical traditions of their time.

So I don't think Wolfe is the only writer who will survive. Of course, in centuries to come, who knows who will remain? Homer's work, after all, comes to us completely isolated from its literary tradition.

Interesting to speculate, anyway!

You said something else that caught my interest:

(snip)

"Daniel Fusch brings up--re the inconsistent or unreliable narrator (Sev) that we've been discussing--the modernist novel. Well, actually, that's not quite accurate, as he brings up -Moby-Dick- and -Paradise Lost- too. But I think that M-D can stand as a modernist novel ahead of its time, and Milton was certainly striving to do something different with PL. The point, and the Faulkner novel is included here, is the effort toward originality."

I think I will agree with you, in saying that Moby Dick is, in many ways, a modernist novel before its time. I think I would call it a tragic romance told via a modernist nature (there's a hybrid for you!). Modernism deals almost exclusively with the Everyman--the ordinary, everyday character

with the ordinary, everyday life, with the ordinary, everyday romance, tragedy, and fall. The traditional tragic romance, on the other hand, deals with the decline and fall of some larger-than-life figure (Macbeth, for instance). Moby Dick has as its main character Ahab, the larger-than-life captain who will sacrifice his ship, his life, his soul...in battle against the Unconquerable, against the Infinite. Yet the narration is distinctly modernist--Melville experiments with different modes of storytelling, and Ishmael--whose identity we never learn much about--is a modernist (and, in part, unreliable) narrator.

I think "The Book of the New Sun" is like this, also. Wolfe presents us with a romance (or a fantasy, if you prefer the modern time), in which a torturer's apprentice becomes a king. This is a very familiar, conventional plot--the tailor who becomes a prince, the girl with the ash-covered face who marries the prince, the pauper who becomes king, etc. But the narration is modernist, experimental.

We might call Melville's "Moby Dick" a proto-modernist work (did you know that only some 20 copies a year were published at first...the novel vanished into obscurity until the 1920s, when the modernists discovered it). It is perhaps too tempting to label Wolfe "post-modernist." One surmises that the author of The Book of the New Sun is well aware of postmodernity--certainly Wolfe is writing metafiction in one sense--although I would argue that metafiction is more an outgrowth of modernism than it is a branch of post-modernism. Faulkner wrote metafiction. For that matter, metafiction has existed in one form or another since the eighteenth century (Henry Fielding comes to mind). (Metafiction, by the way--for those of you who are unfamiliar with the term--is fiction that intentionally draws attention to the methods by which it works, in order to investigate or examine the nature of fiction--the nature of storytelling).

Post-modernism is really extremely difficult to define--it is that work which is "beyond modernism" (it makes more sense when you apply the term to post-colonial writings), and the term usually seems to include both deconstructionism and metafiction.

In the end, I think it safe to assume that The Book of the New Sun is more modernist than post-modernist. The fascination with the nature of Time, the experimental narration, the tendency toward metafiction, the cyclical beginning/ending (reminiscent of James Joyce), and the presentation of different forms of narrative (i.e., Foila's Contest) without a final judgement on them (reminiscent of "The Sound and the Fury" -- in which all four (or five) perspectives are equally important and equally close/distant from the Truth or the Whole of the story) -- all these seem to fit Wolfe's work into a modernist niche.

It is difficult to label "The Book of the New Sun" that easily, however. One must keep in mind that it fits within many traditions. It is a heroic romance, it is a mythopoeic work, it is a modernist work, and it is also a work of science fiction. Maybe assigning one label to the book would deprive it of its totality--would allow us to look at only one part of the whole. That, of course, is a distinctly modernist thought. =)

Well, that's what I've been pondering.

Any thoughts?

Daniel

Jim Henley — 26 Oct 1999, 07:08 · follows Daniel Fusch

-----Original Message-----

From: urth-errors at lists.best.com [mailto:urth-errors at lists.best.com] On
Behalf Of Daniel Fusch

And I think it very likely that some of the science fiction "classics" will last as "relics" of the past...at least for a little while. For example, Asimov's "Foundation" is probably here to stay, whether or not we agree with its "literary merit" (if such a thing can be defined), since that work defined a generation of speculative literature.

Keep in mind also that Heinlein's lasting contribution was precisely a literary one, though people didn't necessarily think of it that way. He changed the way SF stories were told. [Waves hands in the direction of Delany's essay about "The door irised."]

Best,

Jim

"I once was lost
but now I'm just blind"
- Kid Rock

Alice Turner — 26 Oct 1999, 10:23 · follows Jim Henley

From: "Daniel Fusch" <dfusch at hotmail.com>

I think Wolfe's work is likely to last into the next century, although it is unlikely that he will receive much in the way of critical attention for some time to come. I think the work of writers like Walter A. Miller, Jr., Ray Bradbury, and Ursula K. LeGuin will also last into posterity, since they are also authors who experiment with different forms of storytelling. These authors are also--incidentally--taught in today's college lit classes.

Bradbury and LeGuin will last as children's authors. Miller will last for people interested in the history of SF (as Bradbury and LeGuin will too, of course--the way Sheridan LeFanu has lasted).

And I think it very likely that some of the science fiction "classics" will

last as "relics" of the past...at least for a little while. For example, Asimov's "Foundation" is probably here to stay, whether or not we agree with its "literary merit" (if such a thing can be defined), since that work defined a generation of speculative literature.

I would rather watch 24 successive viewings of "Eyes Wide Shut" than have to read the Foundation trilogy again, which is not only abysmally written but also has one of stupidest premises ever concocted. But chacun a son gout.

Certain films--"Things to

Come" and "2001: A Space Odyssey"--will be a matter of speculation throughout the ages; "Things to Come" remains a frequent film for British lit courses even sixty years after its first appearance.

I've never seen "Things to Come." Agree about "2001," for several reasons, one of which is that it is as pure a relic of the 60s as "Sgt. Pepper."

So I don't think Wolfe is the only writer who will survive. Of course, in centuries to come, who knows who will remain? Homer's work, after all, comes to us completely isolated from its literary tradition.

Oh, I never meant that! I was making a point about his encompassing the big pulp traditions with these series, using every bit of the familiar cliches but making them into something bigger and richer so that readers to come could somehow absorb the 20th c. tradition without having to wade through the innumerable precursors.

[snip on Melville]

I think "The Book of the New Sun" is like this, also. Wolfe presents us with a romance (or a fantasy, if you prefer the modern time), in which a torturer's apprentice becomes a king. This is a very familiar, conventional plot--the tailor who becomes a prince, the girl with the ash-covered face who marries the prince, the pauper who becomes king, etc. But the narration is modernist, experimental.

Well, yes; that was more or less my point.

It is difficult to label "The Book of the New Sun" that easily, however.

One

must keep in mind that it fits within many traditions. It is a heroic romance, it is a mythopoeic work, it is a modernist work, and it is also a work of science fiction. Maybe assigning one label to the book would deprive it of its totality--would allow us to look at only one part of the whole. That, of course, is a distinctly modernist thought. =)

Would back you up.

To drop another axiom, forewarned is forearmed....

Like Popeye?

-alga

Alex David Groce — 26 Oct 1999, 13:40 · follows Alice Turner

I also agree that if you had to assign a critical label to Wolfe, it would be as a modernist (much more so than a post-modernist).

I suspect, though, that the most important literary influences on Wolfe are not modernist--I don't particularly see Joyce, Faulkner, Eliot, or Woolf as key to understanding Wolfe. He's mentioned both Woolf and Faulkner in essays or interviews, and I'm sure he's familiar with them, but I think that their _stylistic_ experimentations have had very little impact on his work--the modernist view of art/literature (if you can pin it down) more so, but still not that strong.

I would argue there are two (somewhat arbitrary, I think Wolfe would say, given his views on genre and mainstream) major source groups to look at:

(1) Mainstream literary sources:

The most significant here, I think, is Proust. There is the highly visible influence on "The Fifth Head of Cerberus," but also the running theme of memory: the nature of memory is a central concern in ALL of Wolfe's work-- most clearly in BOTNS and PEACE. And I would argue, without spoiling anything, that it's one of the focal points of OBW (and couldn't LONG SUN be retitled "The Memory of Silk"). This is part of the reason why Wolfe seems to be often at his best when he's writing in a first-person confessional mode, making some particular soul's memory of the past be the whole work. Proust can be called a modernist, and sometimes is, but as Alga points out, he's an odd kind of modernist.

Borges is also always looming over Wolfe's work, although I think more so in BOTNS than elsewhere--you could almost (if you're willing to really stretch some points) say that every story in Ficciones is reproduced in miniature in BOTNS ("Funes the Memorius" and "The Circular Ruins" are obvious ones)--always when Wolfe touches on paradox or time, or starts writing about fictional books within books (the Gold story of how the world is a construct of frauds that become real in PEACE is quintessential Borges--is it a lie when "the universe makes our lies become true?") Borges' shadow is showing.

Some other writers that I see in Wolfe's work are: Chesterton (Father Brown & Silk, but Chesterton's also had a strong influence on Wolfe's worldview), Kipling (the Mowgli/Frog, but also Kipling's feel for soldiers/engineers-- Wolfe's loving detail in describing how the world works and the detail of people doing their work), Dickens (who is the topic of several Wolfe stories-- and the source of Sam Wellerisms, and I suspect Wolfe sees cities much more in the fashion of Dickens/Chesterton/Stevenson than as Joyce saw them or with Eliot's disdainful eye), Conrad, Kafka ("Forlesen"), Robert Graves (since Severian takes a limp and a wife and some prophecies, not to mention a narrative form, from stuttering Claudius), H. G. Wells, and Poe. There's a strong Victorian streak in Wolfe.

But equally important are the "anonymous" sources that can be called mainstream (and the fed the other source)--the Arabian Nights, both by themselves and filtered through Proust's constant evocation of them, Greek and Roman (and to a much lesser extent, Norse) mythology, and fairy tales. Not only do Wolfe's characters tell these kinds of tales, but the tales they live out are often (as many genre stories are) versions of these old types with a highly varied background and less purely archetypal characters.

Finally, the Gospels and the traditions of the Catholic Church influence not only Wolfe's choice of stories and the implications he puts into them, but the trappings of the guilds, manteions and the metaphysics he chooses.

Note that while Wolfe's way of combining these sources can be called modernist (and especially his habit of reworking sources and altering the uses of a form) his literary techniques avoid most modernist experiments: disjointedness, stream-of-consciousness, extremely incapacitated or mentally aberrant narrators (when Wolfe's narrators say they are possibly insane or lying, it is not meant, I think, to be something unusual, as some of the narrators in Faulkner (either The Sound & The Fury or As I Lay Dying) who are meant to be difficult to parse, alien--rather, they are evincing Wolfe's idea that we are ALL, to some extent, mad and incapable of expressing the truths of our experience fully either because of misunderstanding our reluctance to accuse ourselves), or typographical experimentation. Rather, Wolfe prefers "traditional" narrative techniques with prose that is formal and ornamental, Latinate and rich--the one "new trick" he applies a lot is the use of fictional documents that have a history themselves that explain the presence of the text we are reading. But this trick is derived, I think, from Poe & H. Rider Haggard & everyone else who has added "verisimilitude" to a romance by claiming "I translated this manuscript found in a bottle" or "here is a letter from my

strange cousin who went to explore the ruins of America" than from Nabokov or more recent sources. I'd love to consider Nabokov more of an influence, in that there are some striking similarities, but we have Wolfe's report that he didn't come to read Nabokov until well after he had developed the traits I find in both.

(2) Genre sources

While Wolfe draws general ideas from the history of the genre (sword & sorcery trappings, generation ships, the planetary romance), and relies heavily on our expectations (not always violating them, often just using them--any SF reader should quickly suspect once he has a few clues that the towers are old rocket-ships) it seems that Jack Vance is the real center of science fiction's literary influence of Wolfe. I see very little, if any, sign of Asimov or Heinlein or Clarke, or, for that matter, Dick or Bester, in Wolfe. Other writers he's on record as admiring, from Damon Knight and Fritz Leiber to R. A. Lafferty and Ursula K. LeGuin (when he likes her work--Wolfe seems to have shared my distaste for *THE DISPOSSESSED*) also seem to have had little visible influence (presumably with Knight the influence was more personal). I think that when Wolfe encapsulates the genre, he tends to encapsulate it through the filter of Vance--which is why Wolfe's sword & sorcery and generation starship tales take on a strong element of the planetary romance (a tour of cultures). Lovecraft and Clarke Ashton Smith show through here as well, but Smith through Vance, and Lovecraft as someone to evoke rather than in a real sense to resemble. Interestingly, this Vance-ness shines through the fact that even Wolfe's most morally questionable protagonists are usually light-years from Vance's cynical rogues and that Wolfe almost never views a society through the abstract, critical, satiric eyes that Vance often employs.

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

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Jim Jordan — 26 Oct 1999, 14:28 · follows Alex David Groce

At 10:23 AM 10/26/99 -0400, you wrote:

From: "Daniel Fusch" <dfusch at hotmail.com>

I think Wolfe's work is likely to last into the next century, although it is unlikely that he will receive much in the way of critical attention for some time to come.

Alga rejoins:

Oh, I never meant that! I was making a point about his encompassing the big pulp traditions with these series, using every bit of the familiar cliches but making them into something bigger and richer so that readers to come could somehow absorb the 20th c. tradition without having to wade through the innumerable precursors.

I add this (depressing) thought:

Wolfe's writing may be so complex, and so dependent on the tropes of SF, that he will never make it into a "canon." It is hard to imagine non-SF people reading it and thinking much of it, save that it is "weird and well-written, but what on earth is he talking about?" Anybody have anything more positive to put out against such a negative thought?

Nutria

Jim Jordan — 26 Oct 1999, 14:37 · follows Jim Jordan

At 01:40 PM 10/26/99 -0400, Alex wrote:

Note that while Wolfe's way of combining these sources can be called modernist

(and especially his habit of reworking sources and altering the uses of a form)

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I think, to be something unusual, as some of the narrators in Faulkner (either

The Sound & The Fury or _As I Lay Dying_) who are meant to be difficult to parse, alien--rather, they are evincing Wolfe's idea that we are ALL, to some extent, mad and incapable of expressing the truths of our experience fully either because of misunderstanding our reluctance to accuse ourselves), or typographical experimentation.

I think Wolfe intends his characters to be Everyman and Everywoman. I distinguish them because I think Wolfe wants to say that men and women are quite different, and this is sometimes jarring in the light of the kind of "unisex" traditions in our literature. At any rate, he's not showing us weird or unique people, but "ordinary" people in extraordinary situations.

(2) Genre sources

Yes. Vance is clearly the major influence. Wolfe also refers to **The Voyage to Arcturus** as an early influence on him. And E.R.Burroughs is present in **Operation ARES.** (It would be nice if someone would publish that entire book, which was cut down to 1/3 its original length for publication, if only so we'd be able to trace Wolfe's development better.)

Nutria

Daniel Fusch — 26 Oct 1999, 20:01 · follows Jim Jordan

Jim,

(snip)

"I add this (depressing) thought:

Wolfe's writing may be so complex, and so dependent on the tropes of SF, that he will never make it into a "canon." It is hard to imagine non-SF people reading it and thinking much of it, save that it is "weird and well-written, but what on earth is he talking about?"

Anybody have anything more positive to put out against such a negative thought?"

Mind if I put out something positive against that negative thought? Actually, I'm not sure whether it is positive or not. But here goes....

I think you could define me as a technically non-SF person. That is to say, I have read relatively little science fiction--mostly that which has made it up into the upper "literary" spheres of the academic universe. I can't profess to be very familiar with the teeming ocean beneath--just as I cannot profess to be very familiar with the truly vast genre of Victorian mystery, despite my familiarity with those authors who broke the surface and caused such a disturbance that they remain to this day.

(Having said that, I hope you all don't decide to stone me!)

Also, so far as I know, there are a great many people who enjoy science fiction but who do not enjoy Wolfe; science fiction is not traditionally modernist (there I go bringing up modernism again!)

Anyway, when I said that Wolfe was unlikely to receive much critical attention for some time to come, I actually had two reasons in mind:

A. Like you say, Wolfe can be categorized on SF (although I would argue with that word "dependent" -- if I were in a nasty and nitpicky mood). Back in the 40s, science fiction was unfortunately identified with pulp and comic books--even though Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, and many other "literary" authors had experimented with the form in the previous century. This prejudice lasts to this day. The truth of the matter, of course, is that there are both notable and un-notable authors in ALL genres--mainstream or otherwise.

B. "The Book of the New Sun" is less than twenty years old. Since Wolfe has not enjoyed the instant popularity of Tolkien or Dickens, he has not received immediate attention. --Remember, also, that Moby Dick went unnoticed for decades. Time is a factor.

Well, I suppose all that wasn't very positive after all. I suppose my point is: give it a few decades.

Daniel

Daniel Fusch — 26 Oct 1999, 20:24 · follows Daniel Fusch

alga,

Thanks for the reply! Sorry for rambling so much.

You said something I was wondering about:

(snip)

"Bradbury and LeGuin will last as children's authors. Miller will last for people interested in the history of SF (as Bradbury and LeGuin will too, of course--the way Sheridan LeFanu has lasted)."

I'm curious--are we thinking of the same works? I didn't know Bradbury wrote fiction for children. I was thinking of his short stories--"Usher II" and "The Moon Be Still As Bright," for instance--and his "Fahrenheit 451," which seems to be a staple in college fiction courses. When I mentioned LeGuin, I was thinking of "The Left Hand of Darkness" (about as far from children's fiction as you can get) and others. I know she did write some books for children--"A Wizard for Earthsea." I had something else in mind, though.

Anyway, are we thinking of the same Bradbury?

About "Foundation": I have mixed reactions to that work, but I think it is evident that it will last.

About "Things to Come": Watch it if you ever get the chance. 1936, written and directed by H.G. Wells. An eerily prophetic movie. A world war started in 1940 and continued for decades, until a technological society came to power and built cities that look exactly like modern malls, right down to the escalators. The movie brilliantly captured the whole ideology of imperialism and manifest destiny.

About "2001": A relic of more than the 60s, perhaps. Another movie that summarized an entire ideology. It's almost the ideological capstone of the "golden age" of science fiction; its literary roots extend back to Nietzsche--the idea of Zarathustra, the Super-man, the god-man of Reason and The Mind. Well, that's not a very good way of explaining it. I suppose, in a nutshell, the thesis of the film is: "Man is god, and will evolve into ever higher states of existence." I think this theme appeared in the writings of Frank Herbert and also Gordon R. Dickson (but I haven't read Dickson, so I'm basing this on hearsay). It was definitely implicit in much of the mid-century science fiction.

Anyway, these films will be around for a while--they stand as monuments (perhaps I should say monoliths?) to an ideological and literary tradition that had a profound influence on our society.

Hmmm. You know, I suppose that's another, more long-winded way of saying "It's a relic of the 60s," after all.

=)

This is a fascinating discussion. Checking my e-mail this morning, I found almost twenty messages on the mailing list! It must be a very busy mailing list.

Well, it keeps the mind working!

Daniel

P.S. When you have an alias on the mailing list, do I address you by the alias or the actual name?

Daniel Fusch — 26 Oct 1999, 20:59 · follows Daniel Fusch

Alex,

(snip)

"I suspect, though, that the most important literary influences on Wolfe are not modernist--I don't particularly see Joyce, Faulkner, Eliot, or Woolf as key to understanding Wolfe. He's mentioned both Woolf and Faulkner in essays or interviews, and I'm sure he's familiar with them, but I think that their _stylistic_ experimentations have had very little impact on his work--the modernist view of art/literature (if you can pin it down) more so, but still not that strong."

Yes, I meant to say that there are many influences. It is the narration and the narrative structure that is modernist.

You can, by the way, be both a science fiction writer and a modernist writer. Modernism is technique and philosophy; science fiction is a term used to categorize the story and the plot. There are science fiction writers who are realist (I think Kim Stanley Robinson might be a good example). There are science fiction writers who are romanticist (Madeleine L'Engle). There are science fiction writers who are modernist (Walter M. Miller--in part. Also Wolfe and LeGuin--although you could argue that LeGuin is "post-modernist," if you could ever manage to define that literary tradition precisely enough to use it as a label).

Specifically, a modernist narration is one that examines the nature of our perception of reality. The story told in *The Book of the New Sun* is NOT a modernist story, but the narration of the story IS modernist. Severian is a modernist narrator for the following reasons:

A) Severian has an "abnormal" memory, which causes him to perceive reality in subtly different ways than the rest of us do; he cannot forget. Several times Severian lapses into the past, in a dream-like state, allowing us to examine a different means of perceiving time.

Memory is often the subject of modernist work. For example, Benjy in "The Sound and the Fury" also has an abnormal memory; he experiences the past and the present simultaneously, and cannot distinguish between them.

I have not read Borges, but he sounds modernist.

B) Severian is two people, and later more. Thecla-in-Severian surfaces several times during the narration; this allows Wolfe to show us different ways of perceiving reality, while still using a first-person narrator.

C) Severian does give us all the information that one would expect from a linear narrative. He leaves out some events, which we learn about later (I am thinking of his healing of the man-ape's arm, and also his physical intimacy with Thecla).

You mentioned that *The Book of the New Sun* doesn't make much use of stream-of-consciousness. Yet stream-of-consciousness is not the only form of modernist narration; Joyce used it frequently, Woolf didn't use it much, Faulkner used it sometimes but not always. An example of a modernist work that comes closer to Severian's narrative would be Faulkner's "Light in August." Most of the narration in "Light in August" is Third Person Omniscient, which some lapses into stream-of-consciousness and some periods of Third Person Limited. Yet the narration remains very concerned with examining the characters' perceptions of reality.

The Book of the New Sun is also metafiction--by challenging our expectations, Wolfe draws attention to the technique by which the story is told. The reader is not allowed to look ONLY at the story; Wolfe forces the reader to remain aware of both the plot and the technique. In modernist literature, just as in poetry, the way in which you tell a story is as important as the story itself.

Certainly we can say that Wolfe draws upon science fiction, mythopoeia and heroic romance (or heroic fantasy) for his subject matter, and he is clearly influenced by Victorian fiction. But this does not prevent us from also analyzing *The Book of the New Sun* as a modernist work. It is the narration, the form, and the technique, and the use of metafiction that is modernist.

In the end, you can examine the book on any number of levels.

Daniel

Alex David Groce — 26 Oct 1999, 18:54 · follows Daniel Fusch

Daniel:

To be sure, Wolfe's concern with memory and perception is a very modernist idea, and BOTNS (and all of Wolfe's fiction) is highly concerned with not just the stories told but the manner in which they are told--Wolfe, despite being "difficult" for SF, however, eschews the particular quirks of form that are most often associated with modernism by people who took Modernism 101 as a survey Lit. course and think "Modernism = ULYSSES or THE SOUND AND THE FURY" (modernist poetry I'm side-stepping here).

Alga mentions how everyone takes ULYSSES as "the" modernist novel because it is the first (often only) one most people tackle. THE SOUND AND THE FURY is the other most likely candidate, as far as I can tell, in American courses in Modernism 101. Both of these are difficult in part because of part that do not parse as the normal declarative sentences of the novel. Proust and Wolfe do odd things with the structure of what is related to us, in what order, and "how" as in who tells it and why, and may seem difficult at the sentence level because they like complex sentence structures, but they are, for want of a better metric, usually possible to diagram (Proust here, for me, and apparently for Wolfe, is the English translations, and in fact C. K. Scott-Moncrieff doesn't always produce a "good" English sentence, but that's another matter).

It is certainly possible to be a Modernist and a science fiction writer, and because of these concerns it is where Wolfe is probably best categorized. But, for purposes of analysis, I actually think that how little he uses the tools commonly associated with modernism is interesting.

In other words, Severian's strange memory affects what he reports to us, but does not affect _how he reports it_ in the same manner than Quentin's posthumous time-derangement or Benji's retardation does what they report. Severian uses pretty standard 1st-person narrative tools to convey to us even very strange perceptions (like Proust, he tends to wrap anything really odd up in a nest of metaphors--the metaphors, and not a distortion of syntax or semantics, convey the alien experience).

You also said:

I have not read Borges, but he sounds modernist.

For the love of God, go grab FICCIONES or one of the other collections (I guess LABYRINTHS is in print) or, if you're feeling good, the new collected stories, and devour away! It's a true crime that Borges never received the Nobel, especially considering some of the people who did (Bertrand Russell, for instance--a fine mathematician, interesting if wrong philosopher, but really not a particularly great writer). And Borges makes Wolfe better and Wolfe makes Borges better.

So, alga, when (if ever) are you going to explain to us how Wolfe's possibly a racist?

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

--

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Jim Henley — 26 Oct 1999, 22:14 · follows Alex David Groce

-----Original Message-----

From: urth-errors at lists.best.com [mailto:urth-errors at lists.best.com]On
Behalf Of Jim Jordan

I add this (depressing) thought:

Wolfe's writing may be so complex, and so dependent on the tropes of SF, that he will never make it into a "canon." It is hard to imagine non-SF people reading it and thinking much of it, save that it is "weird and well-written, but what on earth is he talking about?"

Anybody have anything more positive to put out against such a negative thought?

Quite the opposite: My good friend Frederick Pollack is one of the country's finest poets. He has two booklength narratives from Story Line Press (THE ADVENTURE and HAPPINESS) and no less than three even better manuscripts in the drawer. And because his work, while densely high-modernist and shot through with what I would cussedly call approved marxist twaddle, makes such heavy (and striking) use of the tropes of science fiction, literary people for the most part have no idea what to make of it.

It's like Delany said, some people won't read sf, some people can't. They just have no idea what the hell is going on, however intelligent they may be and however perceptive about other kinds of writing.

On a related note (who will "survive"), I have to demur from what seems to be the list consensus. We are already at the point where "posterity" ain't what it used to be - it is so relatively cheap to reproduce writing that "the test of time" is ceasing to mean much at all. Consider that two potboilers of the last century, Chesney's The Battle of Dorking and Saki's When William Came, can be readily purchased in the Oxford Popular Fiction reprint edition. What sticks in my mind is that Agatha Christie was precisely the sort of author that someone like Harlan Ellison (or Raymond Chandler FTM) said wouldn't be survived 10 minutes by her work. But you can get almost any mystery she ever wrote without going to any trouble.

Best,

Jim

"Here's a song that you can sing
by which to do the measuring"
-- Elvis Costello, "45"

Damien Broderick — 27 Oct 1999, 12:47 · follows Jim Henley

At 01:59 PM 26/10/99 -0700, Daniel Fusch <dfusch at hotmail.com> wrote:
There are science fiction writers who are modernist (Walter M. Miller--in part. Also Wolfe and LeGuin--although you could argue that LeGuin is "post-modernist," if you could ever manage to define that literary tradition precisely enough to use it as a label).

Ahem. This is not entirely unbroken ground. You might glance at, say, Teresa Ebert, Fred Jameson, Vivian Sobchack, Brian McHale's POSTMODERNIST FICTION or even my own READING BY STARLIGHT: POSTMODERN SCIENCE FICTION.

Specifically, a modernist narration is one that examines the nature of our perception of reality.

And, in the McHale tradition, a postmodernist narration is one that examines the reality of our reality, so to speak.

I'm inclined to regard Gene Wolfe's central affiliation as modernist, FWIW.

And I'm loving this discussion...

Damien Broderick

Daniel Fusch — 27 Oct 1999, 04:12 · follows Damien Broderick

Damien,

"The reality of our reality"! Well said!

I'd hoped that somebody had written something on the topic at some point. I'll look for those books you mentioned--or are they articles?

Thanks for the information!

Daniel

Roy C. Lackey — 28 Oct 1999, 01:30 · follows Daniel Fusch

Jim Henley wrote:

Keep in mind also that Heinlein's lasting contribution was precisely a literary one, though people didn't necessarily think of it that way. He changed the way SF stories were told. [Waves hands in the direction of Delany's essay about "The door irised."]<<

I'm glad to see amid all this discussion of authors, writing styles, influences, and contributions to literature, in and out of the genre, Heinlein get some credit. The younger list members who have grown up with whole shelves of SF&F in the bookstores and libraries probably don't realize that things weren't always that way, and Heinlein was perhaps the major reason for the change. He helped lift SF out of the literary gutter and give it at least a veneer of respectability. And it's doubtful that many of the SF writers of today would be able to command the dollars they do but for him.

Jim Jordan wrote:

I add this (depressing) thought:

Wolfe's writing may be so complex, and so dependent on the tropes of SF, that he will never make it into a "canon." It is hard to imagine non-SF people reading it and thinking much of it, save that it is "weird and well-written, but what on earth is he talking about?" Anybody have anything more positive to put out against such a negative thought?<<

I have argued much as you have, last March, about Wolfe's ultimate place in literature, comparing him to James Branch Cabell, not so much in terms of writing style but as to who will bother to read him fifty or a hundred years from now. Even within the genre, as alga has indicated, most people don't care for Wolfe. Most everyone who reads the genre will have read Wolfe at one time or another, and the all-too-typical reaction is just what you have described. They choose not to bother with his books, that he's just not worth the effort. However regrettable this may be, Wolfe invites it with his chosen writing style. Mantis has described getting what he called "an ice-cream headache" from reading too many Wolfe short stories too quickly. If Wolfe's stories have that kind of effect on someone like mantis, who **likes** Wolfe's work and is willing to go the extra mile, imagine their effect on the larger reading public, which only wants a good story well told. They don't want to read something they don't understand, that leaves them feeling stupid, especially when they know they're not.

As I have indicated before, the urth/whorl list members are a bright bunch, comprising authors, editors and others in the publishing business, academics, scientists, and sundry, some of whom even correspond with Wolfe, all well read. This is the best audience Wolfe could hope for. Yet, nearly twenty years after the publication of SHADOW, debates abound here over even what the plowman saw, never mind the higher meanings. I don't think that augurs well for the Lupine legacy. I think PEACE is Wolfe's best shot at longevity.

And, Alex, I *liked* CASTLEVIEW.

Roy