

Modernism continues (long and sort of boring)

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 26 Oct 1999

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Alice Turner — 26 Oct 1999, 16:54

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.

The Rat adds:

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?

No, not more positive, but I do have some more not entirely coherent thoughts (entirely skippable by those not much interested in the subject.)

When I was quite young, the hot modernist book was -The Recognitions- by Wm Gaddis, which, thank goodness, I did not attempt to read at the time. Much later, after I became interested in church history, I did read it (with a pony, I confess) and now I love it in a qualified way. But it's a hard read, then and now, and for people *not* interested in church history or the abstract New York School of art, maybe not worth it. I'll bet a lot of the younger people on this list haven't even heard of it. They *have* heard of D.F. Wallace's -Infinite Jest- the hot modernist book of the moment, but, for similar reasons (not church history, difficulty), the next generation very probably will not have. At about the same time as Gaddis's book, -Catch-22- also came out, and I think you could make a case for it as a pop modernist novel (it also expressed a lot of young people's cynicism about war, a new kind of cynicism). At any rate, it seems to have achieved 20th c. immortality. It's an easy read, however.

Whereas the "pure" American modernist movement (apart from young Wallace, who's also pretty pure) has not fared well. Coover and Hawkes have retreated into pornographic japery, Gass into essays, Barth into heaven knows what. (I'm not sure he's still alive.) Gaddis was the biggest deal, and he's not read. My guess would be that when 20th c. US survey courses are taught, the modernist representative will be Barthelme, mostly because he's short, but also he has a kind of elegance somewhat missing from the others. I don't think the whole bunch of them are much loved.

The one modernist book to be loved isn't American, it's -Ulysses-. Why? Well, call *me* cynical here, but it's the very first one that most students tackle (chronologically) and it is *so* difficult that it creates a kind of high in kids (it did in me). Once you have struggled through it, however, you don't necessarily want to take on another one!

But scholars will read these books (culled). They are the 20th c. experiment. They are a quirk of our times. And it is scholars and teachers who will form the 20th c. canon. 20th c. genre fiction is sure to be taught too, and this is where Wolfe may shine. They're hardly going to be teaching Terry Brooks! But teaching Wolfe gives an opportunity to allude to all this paperback fodder without actually having to dirty your hands. So, yes, I think he will make it into a canon of sorts.

Whew. Sorry. I'll get back to normal soon.

-alga

Kevin J. Maroney — 26 Oct 1999, 17:26 · follows Alice Turner

At 04:54 PM 10/26/99 -0400, alga wrote:

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Barth is alive and kicking, with a new novel every couple of years. He's not the bestseller he was in the 1960s, but he endures. Coover also publishes every couple of years, and he's always been rather bawdy....

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Ooh. Good point. Wolfe is, in many ways, the "good parts version" of sf.

Wombat, a.k.a. Kevin Maroney kmaroney at crossover.com Kitchen Staff Supervisor, New York Review of Science Fiction <http://ebbs.english.vt.edu/olp/nyrsf/nyrsf.html>

Jim Henley — 26 Oct 1999, 22:30 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

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

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

When I was quite young, the hot modernist book was -The Recognitions- by Wm Gaddis, which, thank goodness, I did not attempt to read at the time.

I started _JR_ [another Gaddis book - ed.] about 10 years ago on vacation. I figured, as I usually do, I will read until my interest flags, then I will stop at the next chapter or section break. About 100 pages in, I thought to check - no, there were no chapter or section breaks in the entire book. Fuck this, I thought, and never picked it up again.

Best,

Jim

"There will always be Costello/
a little larceny Bacharach,
in everyone" "My Thief"

Dan Schmidt — 27 Oct 1999, 14:28 · follows Jim Henley

"Alice Turner" <pei047 at attglobal.net> writes:

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| Recognitions- by Wm Gaddis, which, thank goodness, I did not attempt
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| history, I did read it (with a pony, I confess) and now I love it in
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I administrate the David Foster Wallace email list, and I know a lot of people there, at least, have heard of THE RECOGNITIONS, if not read it. I read it back when I was twenty or so and enjoyed it a great deal; I keep on meaning to go back to it now that I have the Reader's Guide.

Gaddis did get some recognition for winning a National Book Award for A FROLIC OF HIS OWN a few years back (which is the best book to start with, in my opinion). And for dying, unfortunately.

I am sure that a lot of people here would find Gaddis interesting for the same reasons that they like Wolfe.

Dan Schmidt | <http://www2.thecia.net/users/dfan/>