

Fairy Tale logic

The Urth list — 8 messages, 5 voices, 30 Oct 1999

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Nicholas Gevers — 30 Oct 1999, 23:32

As a follow-up to my posting of a few days ago on whether "The Brown Book" can be seen as in some way synonymous with THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN itself: I didn't mean that the two Books are identical; I was suggesting that they are akin. In other words, Wolfe intends us to understand that the structure and logic of Severian's narrative are in important respects similar to those of an anthology of folk tales, fairy tales, myths, and legends: TBOTNS is episodic, and each episode is a tale, or representative of a tale, in its own right.

To illustrate this: many Lupines feel that, as a work of SF, NEW SUN must be subject to scientific explanation at every stage. This can be a very productive approach, as when calculations of the size and effect of solar sails help explain the crucial eclipse in THE URTH OF THE NEW SUN. But elsewhere, Wolfe's conceptual logic is implicitly magical, as in the intuitive symbolic construction of a fairy tale. One may see the grafting of Typhon's head to Piaton's body as scientifically plausible; but viewed closely, the two-headed Typhon must be an uncomfortable arrangement for the Typhon head, which is presumably situated on one of Piaton's shoulders. When the Piaton head is removed, as Typhon's surgeons plan, the monocephalic being left over will be lopsided on top, whether he wears a shirt to cover the scar or not... So Typhon is a mythic construct rather than a plausibly scientific one. Sev's encounter with him is the tale of the bearding of an ogre in its den.

Another example: Inire's recounting (through Domnina, through Thecla, through Sev) of the mechanics of Inire's mirrors. How accountable to physics is his explanation? It sounds like magic under a veneer of pseudo-scientific doubletalk. Again, the logic of a fairy tale holds, with a wizard preserving the secrecy of his craft through misdirection.

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Michael Straight — 01 Nov 1999, 12:09 · follows Nicholas Gevers

On Sat, 30 Oct 1999, [iso-8859-1] Nicholas Gevers wrote:

To illustrate this: many Lupines feel that, as a work of SF, NEW SUN must be subject to scientific explanation at every stage.

[...]

But elsewhere,
Wolfe's conceptual logic is implicitly magical, as in
the intuitive symbolic construction of a fairy tale.

I agree. I think this is one of Wolfe's tricks with TBOTNS. On the surface it looks like swords and magic fantasy. As you read more carefully, you're led to believe that there's a "scientific" explanation for everything, but I think ultimately there's too much that can't be explained that way: the relationship among Severian, the fountain, and the claw, the nature of the Undines (and Baldanders, maybe), Severian's dreams, as well as the things you mention (the mirrors, Typhon's weird two-headed scheme).

If TBOTN were straightforward fantasy, the various unexplained wonders could be dismissed as part of the genre, but by tricking us into reading the book as science fiction, the wonders are more striking, perhaps even questioning the adequacy of materialistic explanations for everything in our world.

-Rostrum

Daniel Fusch — 01 Nov 1999, 20:20 · follows Michael Straight

(snip)

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the book as science fiction, the wonders are more striking, perhaps even
questioning the adequacy of materialistic explanations for everything in
our world.

-Rostrum

Well said! I agree.

Daniel

Michael Andre-Driussi — 01 Nov 1999, 15:24 · follows Daniel Fusch

Nick Gevers wrote:

To illustrate this: many Lupines feel that, as a work of SF, NEW SUN must be subject to scientific explanation at every stage. This can be a very productive approach, as when calculations of the size and effect of solar sails help explain the crucial eclipse in THE URTH OF THE NEW SUN. But elsewhere, Wolfe's conceptual logic is implicitly magical, as in the intuitive symbolic construction of a fairy tale. One may see the grafting of Typhon's head to Piaton's body as scientifically plausible; but viewed closely, the two-headed Typhon must be an uncomfortable arrangement for the Typhon head, which is presumably situated on one of Piaton's shoulders. When the Piaton head is removed, as Typhon's surgeons plan, the

monocephalic being left over will be lopsided on top,
whether he wears a shirt to cover the scar or not...
So Typhon is a mythic construct rather than a
plausibly scientific one. Sev's encounter with him is
the tale of the bearding of an ogre in its den.

Now, as one reader who is obviously guilty of at least some of this "scientism," folks might think that I would be in disagreement with Nick's post--but I'm not, and I suspect that Nick knew that beforehand. I agree with nearly all of it, and the Typhon/Piaton example is an excellent example, as I'll further comment upon in a bit.

Then again, not to be reflexively jerking my leg here, but I really think TBOTNS was initially received/perceived/awarded as a =fantasy= work; to read it as "science fantasy" is the first step of evolution (which seems validated by comparisons to THE DYING EARTH as an icon of science fantasy); to read it as "pure" sf is a further step (or perhaps misstep) of evolution.

It might seem far-fetched right now, but honestly, in my experience it has been a great deal of =work= over a decade to convince people that there really was some sort of sfnal element to TBOTNS that makes it categorically different from, say, THE LORD OF THE RINGS. One small example: all the misdirections given in the text with regard to the age of the solar system (and thus the historical setting), especially the issue of a "dying sun," leads many sf readers to raise arguments regarding stellar evolution ("it will eat up the inner planets as it swells"; "it will be in billions of years, not millions"; etc.).

(Those who grasped on their own reading that there is a black hole eating at the Old Sun seem to have been a special minority of bright, careful readers, who quietly kept it to themselves. But everybody here already knew that about themselves! <g>)

So it may be the case that some have gone "too far" in using a science fictional reading of Severian's Narrative, but it is within a context of earlier readings that were completely blind to sf elements. It is a valid tool, but it does not have universal application throughout the text--yet often the only way to tell if a sf rationale works for a given detail is to actually try it out.

Another example: Inire's recounting (through Domnina, through Thecla, through Sev) of the mechanics of Inire's mirrors. How accountable to physics is his explanation? It sounds like magic under a veneer of pseudo-scientific doubletalk. Again, the logic of a fairy tale holds, with a wizard preserving the secrecy of his craft through misdirection.

Not to give Nick a hard time, but this is not a good example: since the vast majority of even diamond hard sf uses some form of ftl, and all that is explained with "pseudo-scientific doubletalk" of one kind or another. Within the sf genre, transportation devices are traditionally immune to such scrutiny (and weapons are, too); this by itself does not cause all genre sf--with--ftl to crumble into genre "fantasy."

Ah, but the Typhon/Piaton case! I find it excellent because 1) I've never been overjoyed with any of the sfnal interpretations, and 2) I've always been strongly aware of its magical iconography.

"Magical," yes, but most specifically it is "alchemical."

If you pick up a modern book on alchemy, chances are it will have some of those great old woodcuts regarding the stages of The Great Work: which is "turning lead into gold" for the laity.

Red Lion, Green Dragon, Black Raven, Virgin Milk--all sorts of wild stuff. Anyway, in the midst of all this Chemical Wedding, there appears a potent symbol: a two-headed being, usually a big muscular creature with a king's head and a queen's head (both crowned, iirc). Mind you, this is an =allegorical= representation of some funky chemical process --it isn't meant to be some sort of Frankenstein's monster that literally appears.

But this double-header is =not= the end-product: it is not the philosopher's stone. It is only a stage along the way. So, true to form, it must be "killed" so that the next mode can emerge--this woodcut shows the critter being put to bed in a tomb.

THUS, in addition to the Satan's Temptation of Christ elements in the scenes with Typhon and Severian, I have reason to believe that there is an even stronger thread of alchemical thought and tradition represented: one that links up with other keystones of the text to form an adamantine chain.

I strongly suspect that Damien Broderick knows exactly what I'm talking about. (I also know that alga is rolling her eyes at all this!)

=mantis=

P.S. I could've sworn that Jim Jordan wrote something about "The Seraph from Its Sepulcher," at sometime or another, on this list. But I've searched using the Incredible Search Engine and have found no such thing. I recently re-read this story and was wondering what Nutria and/or anybody else had to say on it--that's why I was searching.

=m=

Jim Henley — 01 Nov 1999, 20:14 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

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

From: urth-errors at lists.best.com [mailto:urth-errors at lists.best.com]On
Behalf Of Michael Andre-Driussi

Now, as one reader who is obviously guilty of at least some of this
"scientism," folks might think that I would be in disagreement
with Nick's
post--but I'm not, and I suspect that Nick knew that beforehand. I agree
with nearly all of it, and the Typhon/Piaton example is an excellent
example, as I'll further comment upon in a bit.

I tend to read BOTNS in an SF context until I absolutely can't. But what strikes me is how Wolfe communicates that the scientific habit of mind has pretty much disappeared from Urth itself. The idea of verifying facts about the world through controlled repetition seems alien to just about everyone with the _possible_ exception of Fr Inire, and he's a bug-eyed space monster . .
.

Even simple classification seems somewhat negligent. Sev tells us he fills the unused vincula tunnels with "a mixture of sand, loose stone, lime etc" but never bothers to name the compound.

Best,

Jim

"There will always be Costello/

a little larceny Bacharach,
in everyone" "My Thief"

Daniel Fusch — 02 Nov 1999, 01:53 · follows Jim Henley

OK, Jim,

I have to disagree with this:

(snip)

"The idea of verifying facts about the world through controlled repetition seems alien to just about everyone with the _possible_ exception of Fr Inire, and he's a bug-eyed space monster . . ."

The Scientific Method has NOT disappeared from Urth; it is simply that organized (academic) science has disappeared. And of course the good old "manifest destiny conquer the stars" drive toward technological achievement seems to be missing--that's Vodalus' complaint, after all.

What we see in Urth are the solitary scientists, the lone natural philosophers who experiment privately, without involving themselves with agencies or universities. Baldanders is one example--he is obviously a tinkerer, an experimenter--of the darkest kind. He performs experiments on his captives in order to gain scientific knowledge.

Another rather sinister scientist appears near the end of The Citadel of the Autarch, while Severian is a captive of Vodalus.' Severian meets a man who hypothesizes that organic material exists to feed light, and he tests his hypotheses (or so Severian suspects) by repeatedly burning human children.

Further, we might argue that the Scientific Method was well-known, at least, in Typhon's time. The Typhon/Piaton project was attempted after much experimentation.

Nor is classification or biology absent--it is simply that Severian does not know much about classification. But remember the Botanic Gardens. The curators there had the plants well classified, I would say.

Anyway, I submit to you that the Scientific Method is still very present in the world of Urth. The thing that is missing is an organized group of scientists. There are no grants, there are no associations, and there doesn't seem to be much teamwork (with the possible exception of the botanists). Instead you have scattered, isolated scientists pursuing their separate paths.

That's all I had to say--

Daniel

Daniel Fusch — 02 Nov 1999, 02:06 · follows Daniel Fusch

Hello, Michael.

(snip)

"So it may be the case that some have gone "too far" in using a science fictional reading of Severian's Narrative, but it is within a context of earlier readings that were completely blind to sf elements. It is a valid tool, but it does not have universal application throughout the text--yet often the only way to tell if a sf rationale works for a given detail is to actually try it out."

In the words of Tevye the dairyman (from "Fiddler on the Roof") -- "You are also right."

I wonder about your comments on an alchemical interpretation of Typhon, however. Typhon is connected both to the temptation of Christ in the wilderness and to classical mythology--and these connections seem to me far clearer and more useful than a connection to an alchemical symbol.

Here are my objections:

First--Piaton is not a woman.

Second--The two-headed man is a symbol all over the place--not just in alchemy.

Third--What does Typhon have to do with alchemy? Unless you're trying to draw a vague connection to the "dark arts" in attempting to "make" a man--via Mary Shelley, etc.... But that leaps back to necromancy, not alchemy.

Fourth--If Typhon is related to an alchemical symbol--then just what does that mean? Is it a statement about alchemy? Is it a statement about Typhon's science or society? What relevance does it have?

Anyway, I'm skeptical.

(By the way, thought I'd mention--I enjoyed your book! And, incidentally, another definition for Erebus--in Roman mythology, Erebus is the hell into which Jupiter cast the Titans who aided Saturn in attempting to overthrow him. And the Titans were giants, in one sense. Seems relevant, so I thought I'd mention it.)

Daniel

Jim Henley — 01 Nov 1999, 21:35 · follows Daniel Fusch

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

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

OK, Jim,

I have to disagree with this:

The Scientific Method has NOT disappeared from Urth; it is simply that
organized (academic) sciene has disappeared.<snip>

Daniel, I yield to your superior evidence. Indeed, I roll on my back and stretch my neck before you, making piteous mewling sounds.

BTW, are there any "good scientists" in the saga?

Best,

Jim

"All God's children got a little bit of soul

but not that much . . . "

-- Graham Parker, "Obsessed with Aretha"