

Digest urth.v028.n073

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 03 Nov 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1906>

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David Duffy — 03 Nov 1999, 00:17

VDO on Tue, 2 Nov 1999 urth-errors at lists.best.com wrote:

----- BEGIN urth.v028.n073 -----

001 - =?iso-8859-1?q?Nicholas=2 - Inire's "Mirrors"
002 - "Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey - Re: Inire's "Mirrors"
003 - Patri10629 at aol.com - Re: the superb level of discourse here
004 - "Alice Turner" <akt@attgl - Fairy Tale alchemy
005 - Alex David Groce <Alex_Gr - Re: (urth) Re: the superb level of discourse here
006 - "Greene, Carlton" <CGreen - Technology as Magic and Metaphor (long)
007 - Dan Parmenter <dan at lec.co - Botanical Garden Curator
008 - "Daniel Fusch" <dfusch@ho - Re: (urth) Re: the superb level of discourse here
009 - "Daniel Fusch" <dfusch@ho - Re: (urth) Fairy Tale alchemy
010 - =?iso-8859-1?q?Nicholas=2 - Science and Miracles

URTH Digest -- for discussion of Gene Wolfe's New Sun and other works

----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.1 -----

From: =?iso-8859-1?q?Nicholas=20Gevers?= <vermouliau at yahoo.com>
Subject: Inire's "Mirrors"
Date: Mon, 1 Nov 1999 22:02:42 -0800 (PST)
MIME-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; charset=iso-8859-1
Content-Transfer-Encoding: 8bit

I'm glad to see that my "Fairy Tale Logic" posting ended our dry patch; I'm also gratified that mantis agrees with me in part, a rare event. But to take up the cudgel again: I still contend that Inire's description of the working of his mirrors is intentional gibberish on Wolfe's part, to the extent that he wishes it to be read as gibberish, in contrast with all the intended-to-be-plausible explanations of FTL technology in SF. An ideas-driven writer like Poul Anderson or Isaac Asimov desires his FTL conception to be believed, to be given the benefit of a very large doubt; but for a style-driven writer like Jack Vance or Wolfe, an FTL-exposition is a CONCEIT, a rhetorical contrivance, serving a metaphorical or humorous purpose. Inire's mirrors should be interrogated on that basis.

Incidentally, in defense of mantis' view of Typhon as alchemical symbol: the point of alchemy for many was

the conversion of their base flesh into perfect matter
blessed with immortality. Typhon's aim in usurping
Piaton's body is also extended life.

=====

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----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.2 -----

From: "Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net>
Subject: Re: Inire's "Mirrors"
Date: Tue, 2 Nov 1999 02:10:11 -0600
MIME-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain;
charset="iso-8859-1"
Content-Transfer-Encoding: 7bit

Nicholas Gevers wrote:

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To say nothing of the "white fountain". I would like to see the
scientific explanation for the mating of a man and a larval "angel"
producing an extra-universal remedy for a black hole in a dying sun.

Roy

----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.3 -----

From: Patri10629 at aol.com
Subject: Re: the superb level of discourse here
Date: Tue, 2 Nov 1999 04:32:47 EST
MIME-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii"
Content-Transfer-Encoding: 7bit

In a message dated 11/2/99 12:43:53 AM, Mitchell Bailey writes:

<< As you probably can tell, I'm not a literature scholar. I'll have to paraphrase Sev's line on this subject: if I sometimes manage to seem a peer of the esteemed contributors to this list, or at least one whose company does not shame them (perplexes? annoys?) it is to a significant extent due to that erudition to which I've been exposed here. >>

No, I couldn't tell, and, yes, I know *exactly* what you mean. If ever there was a forum which enhanced and increased my pleasure with Wolfe's work, why humbling me, this is it. What a privilege it is to eavesdrop. Hats off to you, mates.

Love Mr Ansley's Oz reference.

A sidenote: Responding to my constant complaint that parades are not organized in response to, and full-page New York Times reviews are not devoted to each new Wolfe book, (and a national holiday not declared specifically for a masterwork like ON BLUE'S WATERS), a friend replied: "With those godawful covers they slap on his books they're scaring off anybody with half a brain who doesn't already know he's great." Comments?

Actually the cover of OBW is sort of Wolfe in a nutshell--the siren's one grotesque feature is hidden from view, the animal's leg's too. What? What's a few limbs between friends?

I must say again: We are not all lit crit/ sci fi (uh-oh I said the naughty word)/intellectual giants (I mean besides Mantis and Alga), nerds and nerdettes obsessed with minutia (I'll forgive the geographers for the moment). "Minutia." Hey! Maybe That could be my name! (sorry) Is Wolfe so wrenchingly good? So demanding? Am I naive and alone in thinking that his art is ultimately accessible?

best,

Patrick O'Leary

----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.4 -----

From: "Alice Turner" <akt at attglobal.net>
Subject: Fairy Tale alchemy
Date: Tue, 2 Nov 1999 10:04:40 -0500
MIME-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain;
charset="iso-8859-1"
Content-Transfer-Encoding: 7bit

Mantis remarked, in discussion of fantasy v. SF:

"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!)

Well, no. Actually I agree---how not. The Gothic elements refer directly back to alchemy, most specifically in Baldanders's castle by the lake with his "experiments" aided by "elementals" from the air and his great familiar/catamite/clone (and the whole parody, almost Pythoneque, in which Baldanders is both Frankenstein and creature, with Dr. Talos as a "beard"). Also much later when we find the homunculus/mandragora at the Citadel. But, as I have said before, these are almost certainly filtered from the direct Gothic tradition (mostly English) by Wolfe's reading of Goethe's Faust, Part II (the one people don't read so much), which is a weirdly hallucinogenic "take" on the Gothic/alchemical novel with its castles and laboratories and "philosopher's stones" and transmutations.

Typhon too appears in this general air of the Gothic.

And mantis, I don't roll my eyes at your allusions, they start to roll when you seize them (the allusions, not the eyes) with your mandibles and brutally worry them into virtuality.

-alga

----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.5 -----

From: Alex David Groce <Alex_Groce at gs246.sp.cs.cmu.edu>
Subject: Re: (urth) Re: the superb level of discourse here
Date: Tue, 02 Nov 1999 10:21:00 -0500
In-Reply-To: Your message of "Tue, 02 Nov 1999 04:32:47 EST."
<199911020934.BAA25639 at lists1.best.com>

Patrick--

Well, part of my point in the whole modernism debate was that, because he

avoids their techniques, Wolfe is at the least pretty darn accessible for a modernist. While I like that kind of thing, I understand the people who throw ULYSSES and THE SOUND AND THE FURY down and never pick them back up.

The main thing with Wolfe is, you DO have to pay attention. Which some readers aren't very keen on. FREE LIVE FREE and those darned morning glories catches a lot of people sleeping (although if you don't figure out what's going on before "all is revealed" anyway you are not paying attention on a much bigger level).

I'm really not a fan of the OBW cover. On the other hand, the Long Sun covers were OK, if nothing spectacularly good. But they all look like *gasp* Science Fiction Book Covers, which is honest advertising but not too good for getting random non-SF people who would enjoy Wolfe to read him.

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

--

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)
Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department
8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066
<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.6 -----

From: "Greene, Carlton" <CGreene2 at hunton.com>
Subject: Technology as Magic and Metaphor (long)
Date: Tue, 2 Nov 1999 10:38:03 -0500
MIME-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain;
charset="iso-8859-1"

Nicholas Gevers wrote:

>>I'm glad to see that my "Fairy Tale Logic" posting ended our dry patch; I'm also gratified that mantis agrees with me in part, a rare event. But to take up the cudgel again: I still contend that Inire's description of the working of his mirrors is intentional gibberish on Wolfe's part, to the extent that he wishes it to be read as gibberish, in contrast with all the intended-to-be-plausible explanations of FTL technology in SF. An ideas-driven writer like Poul Anderson or Isaac Asimov desires his FTL conception to be believed, to be given the benefit of a very large doubt; but for a style-driven writer like Jack Vance or Wolfe, an FTL-exposition is a CONCEIT, a rhetorical contrivance, serving a metaphorical or humorous purpose. Inire's mirrors should be interrogated on that basis. <<

Roy wrote:

<<To say nothing of the "white fountain". I would like to see the scientific explanation for the mating of a man and a larval "angel" producing an extra-universal remedy for a black hole in a dying sun. Roy >>

Two points. First, I see no reason to give the boot to "scientism." Second, and more importantly, "scientism" and technology-as-metaphor are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually enhancing.

Wolfe's explanations of technology are often mysterious and incomplete, but Wolfe's resort to complete, detailed explanations for certain technologies implies that even the really strange examples have some explanation to them that has not been made entirely clear to the reader. I agree that the explanation of Inire's mirrors reads like sleight of hand, but wasn't it supposed to be a simplistic explanation of a very complicated technology given to a child? (Maybe I've forgotten the context in which the speech was delivered). As to Typhon and his grafted head, it's important to remember that the pieces of humanity's scientific knowledge that have survived the aeons are weird and patchy throughout the books -- maybe a head graft was the most rational means at Typhon's disposal to achieve his goals. We know very little about the operation itself or the medical knowledge available in Typhon's time. It bores us little to say that the operation makes no sense because of what we know about medical science in the 20th century -- many of the technologies described in the TBOTNS assume capabilities (and limitations) which we can neither verify or reject based on current science. Instead, we take from Wolfe's attempt to provide or hint at some scientific explanation for these phenomena the *flavor* that these are miracles of technology rather than magic. In sum, the fact that many of the explanations of particular technologies are shadowy, unclear, or apparently paradoxical given current scientific understanding does not mean that we as readers are not intended to, and should not, understand that some rational explanation lies lurking in the background. I think we are.

More importantly, maintaining the idea that some scientific explanation for these phenomena exists strengthens, rather than weakens, the power of these technologies as metaphors. If it were clear that items like Typhon's two heads and Apheta's quasar-producing, larval lust were meant simply as pure, fluffy fantasy, existing only as a metaphorical allusion, their power as symbols would be less. Instead, the idea that they are simultaneously scientifically explainable events and spiritual metaphors with real power creates a sense of destiny and religious meaning in our physical universe. In TBOTNS every action, object, and interaction reveals some significant truth about the Increate. Sev's discovery of a thorn on a (Pacific!) beach, which is at once biological matter, a relic of real physical power, and a revelation of the divine nature of physical existence, is an example of this principle.

One last point: Given the above, it is interesting to note that the technology of the heirogrammates, a technology infused with love and divine grace, is more obviously metaphorical and more difficult to explain scientifically as physical technology, as Roy points out. My take on this: the closer we get to the divine, the more we understand that the physical universe does in fact exist, but is intended as a functioning, scientific metaphor for certain underlying principles, a particularly graceful way of revealing spiritual truths. The heirogrammates pull the curtain aside on this methodology in a way that we are not exposed to normally, explicitly fusing technology and metaphor. In contrast, the sturdiest scientific explanations in the books are given for items in the hands of the "godless" exploiters of scientific knowledge -- Baldanders and Typhon. I always understood this to mean that this was the sin mankind was being punished for -- the exploitation and achievement of god-like scientific power without the concomitant moral and spiritual development -- without the principle of love or grace or what have you. Mankind is being punished for selling off its emotions in furtherance of blind ambition.

I apologize if I am rambling here, but if I am, it is because I have been

inspired by the exceptional quality of the discussion on this list, and I am certainly grateful for the opportunity to contribute.

C/

----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.7 -----

From: Dan Parmenter <dan at lec.com>
Subject: Botanical Garden Curator
Date: Tue, 2 Nov 1999 10:52:22 -0800

Isn't Father Inire, the old BEM himself at least one of the curators of the Botanical Garden? Damn, I don't have the text here.

D

----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.8 -----

From: "Daniel Fusch" <dfusch at hotmail.com>
Subject: Re: (urth) Re: the superb level of discourse here
Date: Tue, 02 Nov 1999 11:09:51 PST
MIME-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; format=flowed

Hello, Patrick!

I also am enjoying this forum.

About the covers...I couldn't agree more. When I read The Book of the New Sun in paperback, I kept thinking, "What horrible cover art!" Especially on Books II and III. Oh, I suppose the art isn't that bad...it's just incredibly cliché. It has "sword and sorcery/Conan/pulp fiction" written all over it, to use a cliché. No self-respecting lit professor would have books with those covers on his/her bookshelf!

The Tor/Orb editions (the two-volume edition, I mean) of The Book of the New Sun is a little better--the books are well put together, the covers look respectable, and they chose the two best samples of the cover art, at least. My advice--give THOSE editions to your friends.

Patrick--I don't think you are either naive or alone in thinking Wolfe's work ultimately accessible. I can only speak for the Urth cycle and for a few of his short stories, myself (still have to read 5HC and Dr.Death as soon as I get the chance--the time, that is), but I find his work very accessible. Severian's narrative voice--like, say, Ishmael's voice in Moby Dick--draws the reader right in.

(On the other hand, not every one finds Moby Dick accessible.)

I'm not certain why some people "don't get" Wolfe's work. Is it the science fiction element?

Anyway, that's all I had to say.

--Daniel

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----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.9 -----

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

Subject: Re: (urth) Fairy Tale alchemy

Date: Tue, 02 Nov 1999 11:14:14 PST

MIME-Version: 1.0

Content-Type: text/plain; format=flowed

alga and mantis,

I concede the point. You're right--I hadn't looked that carefully at the sequence at Baldanders' castle. The connection to Faust is definitely there--with the Homunculus, after all.

I suppose I hadn't really connected alchemy with the Gothic tradition before--maybe "Frankenstein" is the meeting point, then.

So...if Typhon is--in one sense--an alchemical allusion, what is the significance of the allusion? Is Typhon representative of a desire to perfect the human form (by defeating death)?

--Daniel

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----- MESSAGE urth.v028.n073.10 -----

From: =?iso-8859-1?q?Nicholas=20Gevers?= <vermouliau at yahoo.com>

Subject: Science and Miracles

Date: Tue, 2 Nov 1999 11:34:11 -0800 (PST)

MIME-Version: 1.0

Content-Type: text/plain; charset=iso-8859-1

Content-Transfer-Encoding: 8bit

I agree with other parties to our debate that the ever-present possibility of scientific explanations for events enriches NEW SUN, lending it rigour, speculative depth, and metaphorical power. But as LONG SUN makes clear, it is sometimes the possibility of a miraculous explanation that is the most effective literary device in Wolfe's work. I think that Wolfe at times intentionally misleads his readers into byways of scientific explication, in effect challenging them to see the wood for the trees, the Word for the World; when they fail to find secular explanations, or contrive ones that are trivial and unsatisfactory, they must perforce acknowledge the supremacy of the miraculous.

Another point: a miraculous explanation for a textual incident doesn't entail capitulation to the intellectually slack fluffiness of genre Fantasy plotting. Wolfe intends us to understand supernatural events as ultimately purposeful Divine interventions or concessions, not as the random conjurings of elves and wizards.

=====

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----- END urth.v028.n073 -----

Steve Taylor — 03 Nov 1999, 04:45 · follows David Duffy

Patri10629 at aol.com wrote:

A sidenote: Responding to my constant complaint that parades are not organized in response to, and full-page New York Times reviews are not devoted to each new Wolfe book, (and a national holiday not declared specifically for a masterwork like ON BLUE'S WATERS), a friend replied: "With those godawful covers they slap on his books they're scaring off anybody with half a brain who doesn't already know he's great." Comments?

Heartily seconded. I avoided _Book of the New Sun_ for years because I didn't want to read the sort of B-grade fantasy that would bear titles like _The Shadow of the Torturer_. Then I read Michael Moorcock's extremely opinionated and slightly bonkers book of essays on fantasy (can't think of the title) and was sufficiently impressed by the chapter on _BOTNS_ to give it a try. After that, all was lost...

It wasn't actually the covers that scared me away, as being a lifelong reader of SF/F I'm used to being caught reading books with clumsy, juvenile or embarrassing covers. (Though just this week I found a particularly horrid copy of _There Are Doors_ with a quite obnoxious Wet T-Shirt Contest/"look at my nipples" cover.)

Tangentially: Can anyone point me to any online writing on _There Are Doors_? No specific comments or questions on my part yet, but I'd like to see what others may have said.

Steve

Alex David Groce — 03 Nov 1999, 12:41 · follows Steve Taylor

I believe there are some way back in the Urth archives. I know I asked something or other, but I can't remember what. I think long ago Alga used _There Are Doors_ in her "three kinds of women in Gene Wolfe stories" comments.

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

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)
Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department
8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066
<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>