

Scientific and mystical explanations in _New Sun_

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Dan Rabin — 03 Nov 1999, 21:49

A couple of points:

1. Wolfe clearly enjoys having simultaneous scientific and mystical explanations for phenomena (viz. Dr. Crane's explanation of Silk's enlightenment). I think the early story "Trip, trap" gives a good example of this, where each of three beings has a satisfactory (to itself) way of looking at their three-way encounter, one of which is decidedly fairy-tale-like.

2. I think Wolfe has summed up his attitude on the roles of the respective points of view in the remarks of the tea-vending woman at the Saltus fair:

"Oh, it [the cathedral of the Claw, which Severian and Dorcas had seen suspended in midair] rose all right. When my grandson-in-law heard about it, he was fairly struck flat for half a day. Then he pasted up a kind of hat out of paper and held it over my stove, and it went up, and then he thought it was nothing that the cathedral rose, no miracle at all. That shows what it is to be a fool--it never came to him that the reason things were made so was so the cathedral would rise just like it did. He can't see the Hand in nature."

Excuse me, I have to take a little rest every time I read that...

OK, I'm better now. On the surface it's a sly jab at deism, but we might extrapolate: Mercury being a barren planet that looks like the Moon doesn't make it any less the Messenger of the Gods; the stars being gravitationally-bound fusion reactors doesn't make them any less jewels placed in the firmament by the Creator, and so on. Explanations don't explain; reductionism doesn't reduce. A miracle remains a wonder even when explained and reduced.

[I don't happen to agree with this point of view, but I can't dismiss it.]

-- Dan Rabin