

Report on the Gene Wolfe Symposium

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 28 Aug 2000

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Nigel Price — 28 Aug 2000, 11:15

Grateful thanks to Jonathan Laidlow for organising, and to the English Department of the University of Birmingham for hosting, Saturday's Gene Wolfe Symposium. It was a fascinating day, and it was great to meet some of the British-based members of the Urth and Whorl lists.

The morning was devoted to the Book of the New Sun, and, not having finished writing up my paper (some lame excuse about holidays and visitors from the States) I mumbled and stumbled my way through my notes on a proposed explanation of the Urth cycle in terms of a combination of topical satire and allusive neo-platonic hierarchies. (Alga, you asked ages and ages ago if you could have a copy of my paper when it was finished. Yes, of course you can - I should be very interested in your comments. All I've got to do is finish writing the wretched thing first! I'll send you a copy as soon as it's done, but don't hold your breath!)

Plenty of constructive discussion on that, and then on to a paper from James Russell on the strategies which Gene Wolfe employs in the Urth cycle to convey the strangeness of his post-historic world. Some fascinating analysis, particularly on the use of arbitrary and apparently illogical systems of categorisation to describe society and natural phenomena as a means of depicting alien patterns of thought and cultural assumptions.

After a buffet lunch, we had a helpful update from Peter Wright, on the current state of the publishing of Lupine literary criticism - more encouraging than I had expected - followed by a few tantalisingly brief glimpses of Peter's own forthcoming book on Wolfe, which I am very much looking forward to reading.

Peter then went on to read us his paper on post-colonialism in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. An overtly political interpretation of the book, Peter explored not only the contrast between the stifling immutability of Number Five's cloned family and the shape-changing mimicry of the native Annese, but also the political and sociological implications of cultural imitation, as the colonised both flatter and satirise their colonisers by adopting their ways and values. In this reading, such imitation leads to the inevitable corruption of the colonised, a snare only avoided by a mutual willingness to embrace cultural and racial hybridity. This hybridity is represented in *Fifth Head* by the ambiguous figure of Marsch-Trenchard, whose eventual imprisonment represents the failure of the colonial society of St Croix and St Anne to accept this option.

(Did I get all that right? Other attendees correct me, please!)

After further discussion, Jonathan Laidlow read the last paper of the day, Nick Gevers' exploration of the spiritual plight of the chems in the *Long and Short Sun* book. Nick helpfully categorises the different types of artificial life in these stories, and examines their tragic limitations as soulless beings. Despite their aspirations to humanity and even godhood, they remain inferior to human beings, and stay trapped in their mechanical and electronic existence, even as most are forced to remain on the failing Whorl when the human colonists finally leave for Blue and Green.

(Is that a fair summary, Nick?)

A final round of discussion of Nick's ideas took us to the end of the afternoon, leaving us with no time for the day's last programmed item, a proposed discussion of Wolfe's mysterious short story "A Solar Labyrinth". A shame, because I would have liked to have heard what everyone had to say.

Of course, even after so much discussion, some important Lupine mysteries remained. How do you pronounce "Gevers"? (Or "Andre-Driussi", for that matter.) What does Robert Borski do for a living? Will we ever get to read "Soldier of Sidon"? And what music does Gene Wolfe listen to while pedalling his exercise bike in his basement at six o'clock in the morning? (Peter Wright has introduced him to the gentle lyricism of Iron Maiden - frightening thought - and confirms that GW listens to a lot of folk music. I'd always imagined that he listened to Country, a guess which was partially confirmed by Those-In-The-Know, but what else does he play on the lupine hi-fi?)

It was an excellent day, and I look forward both to reading the published papers, and to next year's event...

Nigel

Peter Westlake — 31 Aug 2000, 12:04 · follows Nigel Price

At 11:15 2000-08-28 -0400, Nigel Price wrote:

Grateful thanks to Jonathan Laidlow for organising, and to the English Department of the University of Birmingham for hosting, Saturday's Gene Wolfe Symposium. It was a fascinating day, and it was great to meet some of the British-based members of the Urth and Whorl lists.

Seconded! Ignore what Nigel says about mumbling and stumbling - his talk was very good. It now seems the most natural thing in the world for someone to use allusive neo-Platonic hierarchies for topical satire, and I can't think why I didn't notice it earlier :-). All the papers were very good, and I hope Jonathan's plan to get them published succeeds. I'm impressed by Nigel's summary, too. Were you recording it, Nigel, or just taking very good notes? I stopped writing things down when I heard the papers were to be published.

Because Peter Wright was going to talk about The Fifth Head of Cerberus, I finally managed to make enough time to read it while wide awake. Reading before going to sleep, as I normally do, doesn't work for Wolfe! I finished it on the train, half a mile outside Birmingham, so it was fresh in my mind for Peter's talk. The only thing I would add to Nigel's synopsis is the idea that Victor is in some sense free, though imprisoned, because he is no longer part of either of the conflicting societies. (That isn't a very good way of expressing it, I fear - are you here yet, Peter?) Since then I have had a look at Robert Borski's "Cave Canem" website, and the contrast between the two interpretations is quite marked. In one, VRT is a positive figure, even becoming quite a good anthropologist, and in the other he's a crazed killer! One problem I had with "Cave Canem" is that it fails to distinguish things stated in the text from conjecture. It assumes that the cat is a shape-shifted Annese woman, for instance, which seems very unlikely to me.

On the way home I read "Strange Travelers", which was probably a mistake. Reading "And When They Appear" when you're tired is not an experience I would wish on anyone. I tried reading on in the hope of finding something more upbeat ... well, most of you will have read ST,

so you can imagine.

One small question about ST - in "Ain't You Most Done?", Tim notices a strange day, "Grunday". I came across the same thing last night, as a typo in the course schedules in "Death of the Island Doctor". Searching the web just gives me lots of people called Grunday. Is it something to do with the Sandman references that have been mentioned here?

Peter (Spectacled Bear).