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The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 05 Dec 2000

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 05 Dec 2000, 12:35

Adam, thanks for replying.

1. That Gene Wolfe did in fact have a "real" and (more or less) coherent biography of ADW in mind when he wrote PEACE;

I agree that Wolfe had something definite in mind; whether it was a coherent biography of Weer, or a collection of deliberately fragmentary or inconsistent biographical "facts" I don't know.

Well, that's an interesting question -- one that I hadn't really considered because I think that Wolfe is, in a way, a very conservative writer. He uses pomo tools like metafiction and auctorial intrusion and such, but he seems at the same time to be concerned, first and foremost, with telling a story, and I think he uses those tools in the service of the story. If you disagree with that, then you won't agree with anything else I'm going to say, and so might

as well stop reading here.

What isn't always clear at first blush is what story Wolfe is telling. That's really why we have URTH OF THE NEW SUN: he was telling one story and Hartwell was reading (or expected Joe Reader to be reading) another story, and wanted to know how that story "came out." And, yeah, at first glance, tBotNS looks like a save-the-world story, when it's actually more of a bildungsroman -- "The Making of the Messiah, Parts 1-4" rather than an actual gospel account, which we then get in URTH. (Modulo Wolfe's quite justified point that Severian is not the Messiah.)

2. That PEACE does not give us the clues to accurately, reliably, and consistently reconstruct that biography.

[...]

The question is, assuming that all this uncertainty is not arbitrary (which would by implication predicate of its author a kind of meanness vis-a-vis his readers that I simply do not see as likely in the case of GW)

When I talked about the "trap" of biography, I didn't mean to imply that Wolfe was being pointlessly sadistic (though I'm not as convinced as you of his essential helpfulness; after all, he's written one novel and a number of shorter works which nobody, AFAIK, has yet made any sense of).

Which novel? There are some I haven't completely worked out, but none of them have completely failed to make any sense to me.

A couple of the short pieces, otoh, just leave me going, "Huh?" I suspect that in a couple of cases, what's going on is just what's going on. I remember all the speculation here about "Suzanne Delage"; on rereading that story a month or two ago, I came away firmly convinced

that it was just about what it says it's about, the circumstances surrounding an event that the narrator simply cannot remember because it fails to fit into the context of his life. Because he can't remember it, he can't really tell us anything about it, and so we cannot know what it is. End of story. (If anyone wants to say that this makes the story pointless I won't argue; I find it entertaining on its own terms.)

Wolfe's intent, under this hypothesis, would not be to make the reader endlessly and fruitlessly hunt for clues, but to make a point about the mutability of memory, or the indeterminacy of reading or knowledge.

I agree with this; I think it's another way of approaching the same basic thing I am saying: that PEACE is not about the surface events of Weer's life so much as it is about the process of recollection/reliving/reconstruction/falsification (mix 'em and match 'em, kids! The first one's always free!) by which those events are related. I think one key to the whole shebang is the question of whom Weer [thinks he] is writing to; at one point he addresses his readers as "ladies." (Olivia?)

I partially agree with what I think you're saying. I agree that there are aspects of the book which can be "comprehended" apart from Weer's biography, and that we should look at the why and how, not just the what, of Weer's narration much more closely than we've done so far.

This is what I have been trying to drag towards, the basic point of my "story of Weer telling his story" tagline. Time/place of narration are [well, seem] very important to Wolfe: look how carefully he sets up the locus of writing for tBotNS. The "Soldier" books are another example of this -- with each new entry we have to ask how long it's been since the last one, where Latro is writing, and what has happened since (especially what has happened that Latro has forgotten before writing).

But, to jump ahead in your post, I'm skeptical that reading the book as "the story of Weer telling his story" will make it more determinate or comprehensible.

I'll agree that it may not make things any more determined; what I suggest is that it gives the indeterminacy a kind of coherency and meaning. Why are the events so inconsistent/incomplete? Because of when and how and why they are told. This is the heart of the matter.

I'm not saying that the surface events don't matter; far from it. That would be like saying the words Wolfe uses to tell the story don't matter. But I think we need to perceive a minimum of three narrative layers.

In this I'm somewhat indebted to the model by which mystery novels are generally built: a mystery has at least three plots, in successive layers. There is what actually happened (plot 1); there is what appears to have happened (plot 2); and there is the story of how the detective moves from the appearance of the latter to the knowledge of the former (plot 3). The third is, of course, the "surface narrative."

Similarly I see in PEACE at least the possibility that there is a real "what happened"; and there is a second layer, which is Weer's narration, what he says happened; and there is a third layer, not of moving from Weer's narration to a real "what happened," but of moving from Weer's narration to a/the real PEACE, to the solution to the puzzle "What is this book _about_, anyway?" One thing PEACE is about is us reading PEACE.

On the contrary, it seems only to lead to "confusion worse confounded," at least on the evidence of the discussion here. At least we can put together a basic outline of Weer's life, even if it's missing information on crucial points.

Not only missing information but apparently contradictory in several places; some of these, apparently, can be shoehorned into a kind of consistency, but I question the value of doing this.

But when it comes to Weer's present situation, we can't even agree on the simplest facts: is he alive or dead? If alive, is he young or old?

Is there anyone on this list who seriously maintains that he is not dead?

If dead, is he on his way to heaven, resurrection, or neither?

Well, that's quite the problem, isn't it? But perhaps we should take the title seriously; perhaps the book is indeed about how Weer either finds or fails to find Peace.

To add to the confusion, Weer's description of his present contains far more, and more glaring, anomalies than his account of his past. It's true that (judging by what I've read) less work, in the sense of close reading, has gone into investigating these questions than into investigating Weer's biography, so it's possible that with more work things might clear up.

I also question whether there is a coherent distinction between the "present" and "past." If Weer is actively reliving or recreating, the distinction becomes moot.

The scenes where Weer-of-the-"present" speaks to the other characters through the medium of Weer-of-the-"past" suggests either reliving or recreating; and we can only make it "reliving" if we are willing to accept that he actually said some these things the first time through -- for example, that he actually told his doctor, years before his stroke, that he was actually an old man who'd had a stroke. If not, then that entire conversation is not recollection or reliving but recreation, even if only in memory/imagination.

(Of course that is possible; it may be able to produce a coherent reading in which Weer's future ghost actually moves back in time and takes possession of his younger body for these discussions. One would think, though, that his saying such things would give the doctor more concern about Weer's sanity than is shown by his giving TAT-type tests.)

Second, I suggest that the book contains everything necessary for a useful reading. This is important; it is, I think, the difference between calling Wolfe a sadistic and manipulative writer and calling him a tricky but skilled and fair writer.

There's a third possibility: that Wolfe misjudged what a reader could reasonably be expected to infer.

Well, yeah. That actually did occur to me, but I didn't want to raise the spectre of PEACE being a less than competent performance on Wolfe's part...

[...]

[Scripture-like interpretive technique:]

Of course, Wolfe is aware that he isn't God (he even wrote a story on the topic), so he would presumably concede that he might have occasionally contradicted himself, or failed to say what he meant to.

Well, yeah. That wasn't my point, though; I wasn't suggesting that Wolfe or I thought Wolfe infallible. I was suggesting that Wolfe might have that kind of reading in mind while writing. This is almost certainly so in the "Sun" books, which appear to have some kind of Scriptural authority in their various whorls -- I won't discuss that wrt "Long/Short" on this list, but tBotNS seems to be either the "Book of the New Sun" that Severian refers

to several times in the course of his narrative, or perhaps a textual ancestor of it.

In particular I think that it would be worthwhile trying to apply the technique of "genre criticism," in which each text of Scripture is interpreted on the basis of "what kind of writing it is." The interpretive tactics for a poem (such as the Psalms or Song of Songs) are quite different from those for a history (Exodus, Samuel/Kings/Chronicles) or a prophetic book (the Prophets, duh). This applies, obviously, to the earlier observation that each of the parts of PEACE seems to be set in a different "genre"...

First, I think we may immediately conclude that we are not expected to discover a (single/consistent/reliable) status for "the 'past'

sections."

"What is the status of the 'past' sections" is not among the most useful questions to ask.

If you're saying that the "past" sections don't all have the same status, I agree. If you're saying that it's not useful to ask what the status of any particular "past" section (or portion thereof) is, I disagree (but I don't think you are).

No, I'm not. I am saying that I'm more and more convinced that they are not meant to be assembled into a coherent picture of Weer's "past," and that the "status" of at least some chunks may be permanently indeterminate.

Second, Adam left out at least two other possibilities.

1. Recollecting the past.
2. Reliving the past.
3. Recreating the past.
4. Lying about the past.

Well, I had been illustrating a point, not offering an exhaustive list. But I like your typology.

Thanks.

The idea that Den actively lies to us is probably the duller choice. The idea of straightforward recollection is only slightly more interesting; if this were the general case, we would have very little in the way of mystery.

Actually, (setting aside the other two possibilities on your list for a moment), Weer is almost certainly neither 100% lying nor 100% "straightforwardly recollecting." Instead, his narrative is a combination of recollection, suppression, and (perhaps) lying that is nearly impossible to disentangle. So I don't agree that we have "very little in the way of mystery."

I don't see any particular evidence of Weer's lying, except perhaps to himself, defensively. I'm not eliminating it as a possibility, mind, but I'd like to see where you think he's lying and why.

Indeed, if I could ignore all the ellipses, elisions, and contradictions in Den's story

I certainly wouldn't ignore these, but we don't need Weer's "reliving" or "recreating" to account for them, although there are other reasons why Weer has to be "recreating at least to some extent.

... again, I'm not sure he _has to_ be: if we are willing to accept that he is actually "haunting" his own life as described above. (Actually, I find this extremely unlikely but can't simply ignore it.)

I would have to conclude that PEACE consisted of the somewhat-incoherent ramblings of a not particularly interesting person.

Heh. Except for the "not particularly interesting" bit, that's a pretty good description.

I dunno -- He doesn't seem like anyone I'd particularly want to know in RL.

But I'm skeptical that "recreating" can be the master key to building "a coherent and consistent model," as you seem to be suggesting, at least one which is grounded in the text.

Okay, here's a bogey model.

Weer is dead, to begin with. In the grave he is undergoing a process by which he goes, or is led, through his life, given the opportunity to change his mind (a la the Chinese Pillow; but cf also "It's a Wonderful Life"... H'mm, this paragraph is taking on a holiday theme...), "repent of" his former decisions, and so achieve Peace.

Two additional speculations help:

1. This may be an iterative process, and we may be seeing only one loop (or part of one)
2. Weer may not be (almost certainly is not) aware of the nature of the process.

I suggest that this model offers a coherent and consistent reading. Feel free to attack it.

--Dan'l