

PEACE: Wolfe a conservative writer? [was RE: Digest urth.v030.n031]

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 06 Dec 2000

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2488>

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Adam Stephanides — 06 Dec 2000, 11:51

Much of what you say I agree with, or need more time to digest. But here's an initial response, to keep the dialogue going while it's fresh in my mind:

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Adam, thanks for replying.

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.

I'm not sure what you mean here; you seem to be implying a contrast between "the story" and "the way in which the story is told" and saying that Wolfe gives priority to the former over the latter, which would contradict your insistence that PEACE is not the story of Weer's life, but the story of Weer's telling his story (and if the latter counts as "putting the story first," then the most pomo book can claim to be "putting the story first"). But I don't agree, at any rate, that Wolfe is a "conservative" writer (although that's another term whose meaning is unclear). I think that Wolfe's concern to "deconstruct" the act of narration, which you touch upon below, makes him a radical writer, although he's not as flashy as some self-consciously pomo writers (and although he sometimes affects an aggressively antimodernist, we-don't-need-no-steenking-critics stance). I think PEACE in particular is a very radical, even experimental novel.

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 URTN.

And I don't think this example really supports your point. There's a great deal in tBotNS whose relevance to the bildungsroman story is tangential or unclear.

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.

CASTLEVIEW (I had expected that would be obvious). And I'd love to hear what you make of it.

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.

A digression here: you apparently believe that the narrator did know Suzanne Delage, as do I (am I right?); whereas what the story says it's about is the reasons why he didn't know Suzanne Delage.

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.

Which, to return to an earlier point, is not something a "very conservative writer" would be likely to do; in fact, it's exactly the sort of thing the modernist authors of the early twentieth century were preoccupied by. Nor is it generally the sort of thing people mean when they talk about "putting the story first."

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?)

If you're referring to the spot on p. 14 of the Harper & Row edition ("Ladies, this was not what I wanted"), Weer is referring here not to his readers, but to the women at Weer's birthday party, who apparently have mentally intruded on his visit to Van Ness.

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?

I don't recall anybody saying that Weer is definitely not dead, but several people have discussed the Chinese Pillow reading as one possibility. And mantis has, iirc, dropped some hints that Weer may not be dead (which I hope he will eventually flesh out).

(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.)

Well, the doctor does ask Weer if he takes drugs. But I don't buy this reading either.

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.

I don't think that Weer has been definitively shown to be lying, which is why I put in that "perhaps." The best candidate for his lying is his account to Dan of the coldhouse prank, which I

discussed in my earlier post.

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

Well, he would have a lot of stories to tell, at any rate, and would tell them well (at least until the ending).

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 "Its 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.

That's why I put in the clause about being grounded in the text. I don't think that this model is, although I've discussed this before and I don't expect you to agree with me.

--Adam