

Grounded in the text?

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 06 Dec 2000

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 06 Dec 2000, 13:42

Adam Stephanides wrote:

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:

What he said.

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"

No; I'm more interested in the contrast between "telling a story" and "making points by playing with the readers' heads." Wolfe does in fact play with readers' heads; but it seems to me that this is in service of the story, rather than the other way around. (Generally.)

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.

Oddly, I don't want to argue this point: but see below.

I also question whether Wolfe is so much deconstructing as reconstructing the act of narration, by (for example) insisting on a particular time and place of narration that affect the manner and content of the narration. This is not a particularly radical gesture; in fact, it's a standard pulp trope. H.P. Lovecraft used it (badly) all the time ("They are right outside the door..." or "la! la! Shub-Niggurath, the Goat with a Thousand Young..." or "That hideous, three-lobed eye..."). I even ran across it in the Nero Wolfe novel I reread last night ("The Second Confession"), though I shan't explain because it involves the solution of a mystery, and those who reveal the ending of mystery novels get a fully deserved, one-way ride to Hell.

You might even say that he uses it in radical ways, and I might agree; but then, as I said, I think he uses radical tools to conservative ends. I'll even grant "radically conservative," radical in the same way that the Gospel is radical.

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.

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.

Unclear I'll grant. Tangential? Perhaps -- but tangential to whom? Not, I imagine, to Severian. Tangentiality resolves to unclarity-to-us.

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.

This is the one GW novel about which I can say almost nothing; I've read it only once, several years ago. I don't recall it being especially obtuse -- not, certainly, compared to PEACE or 5HC -- but I read it under somewhat unfavorable conditions (a redeye flight, and immediately following PANDORA) and may have missed its obtuseosity completely.

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.

That isn't quite what I said. I said that something happened which the narrator is incapable of remembering, because it doesn't fit into the rest of his life. He perceives not-meeting Suzanne as some kind of hole in his experience; such a hole may be indicative of the unrememberable, though what exactly he can't remember may not be an encounter with her. I suspect it is, but would not care to mount an argument to demonstrate it.

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."

This is the "see below" above.

You seem to be pointing at a kind of "experimental" that was very experimental indeed in the 1920s, and that most of the pomos would sniff at as mere "modernism." And it is indeed putting the story first: but the story being put first is not necessarily the story that the reader immediately thinks it is. The process by which some events are related is every bit as legitimate a "subject" for a story as the process by which they occurred.

Another way of taking this: the Thousand Nights and a Night is about the process by which Scheherazade tells a series of stories; further, some of those stories are themselves about the telling of stories. I do not think I am calling Wolfe terribly radical if I suggest he may have adopted this as a model, particularly given the "Nights" references in the novel. We might argue from there that PEACE is not precisely a novel, and I won't debate that point; perhaps it isn't.

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.

That is the passage (it's on p13 of my Berkley ed'n), but is in a paragraph set off by slugs, between a "birthday party" passage and a "Doctor Van Ness's office" passage. The ladies at the party have just been discussing the falsification of the Indian treaty.

The paragraph in full:

One moment, please. Let me stand and walk to the window; let me put this broken elm branch -- shaped as though it were meant to be the antler of a wooden deer, such a deer as might be found, possibly, under one of the largest outdoor Christmas trees -- upon the fire. Ladies, this was not what I wanted. Ladies, I wish to know only if in my condition I should exercise or remain still; because if the answer is that I must exercise I will go looking for my scout knife.

Now, I could be wrong, but it seems to me pretty darned clear that this is Weer in the porch of his memory-house, addressing -- well, three possibilities.

1. He is addressing his hypothetical readers.
2. He is addressing the ladies (Sherry, the nurse, etc.) in the doctor's office.
3. He is addressing the ladies at the party.

But of these three, only the first is fully coherent; the third involves a level of incoherency where he simply cannot distinguish between the porch and the party. I suppose this is no worse than a marginal reading, but I see no special value in a marginal reading when a fully coherent one is available. (Unless, of course, you want to argue for "all of the above" and maybe others.)

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).

So do I; but I think the evidence that Weer is dead is overwhelming, and will stand with that until and unless.

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.

My apologies; I should have said "lying in his account," as opposed to lying to one or more of the people in his account. This makes a great deal of difference.

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.

[...model postponed...]

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.

Point by point.

Weer is dead, to begin with.

I hope I don't have to show that this is grounded? Perhaps not proven, but certainly grounded.

In the grave

I demur on "in the grave." The "freed by the fall of the tree" bit can be interpreted as saying he is no longer in the grave; however, I did not mean it as physical location.

he is undergoing a process by which he goes, or is led, through his life,

That he is in some sense going through his life is clear. "Is led" is more questionable; it leads back to my speculation on the doctors, and possibly others, as psychopomps. Certainly the words and actions of the doctors seem to spark many of Weer's trips down memory lane; the only real speculation here is that it is done deliberately.

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.

Grounded, to begin with, in the title. A reading that doesn't make sense of the title is (imo) not particularly interesting. As for "changing his mind," I don't necessarily mean that he gets to change what actually happened, but at least he has the opportunity -- whether or not he takes it -- to reevaluate his attitude toward it: thus the "repentance" angle. (I am still working with variations on the "purgatory" model, if that wasn't clear.)

Two additional speculations help:

1. This may be an iterative process, and we may be seeing only one loop (or part of one)

This obviously is pure speculation; primarily it's a way of accounting for the semicoherent opening and closing, but I can't really call it "grounded" in the text.

2. Weer may not be (almost certainly is not) aware of the nature of the process.

Grounding by negatives: granting per argumentum the major premise, there is nothing in the text that would suggest that Weer is aware of it.

William Ansley — 08 Dec 2000, 00:03 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

At 1:42 PM -0800 12/6/00, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Adam Stephanides wrote:

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I can't let this pass without comment. I am sure I won't change your mind Dan'I, but as far as I am concerned, the only reasonable choice from your list of who Weer could be addressing when he says "ladies" in the passage you quote above is number 3. I really have no idea what you mean when you say choice number 1 is the most 'coherent.'

We have a book written by a dead man who doesn't know he is dead, and who seems to believe that he can send his mind back into the past to earlier parts of his life and yet doesn't seem to think that this is at all unusual. (Here I am describing what it seems to me that Weer believes is happening to him rather than what is "really" happening to him, assuming that what is really happening in the context of

Peace can ever be determined.) When he does send his mind back into the past, it has a strong tendency to bounce around, as the past events he encounters recall other past events ("Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.") Various parts of what seems to be the past blend together with each other and also with what seems to be the present. I am not sure using coherency as the basis for analysis make sense.

From the beginning of the book to the passage you quote, Weer's "time travels" seem to go like this. (I have the Orb paperback edition of Peace handy and I will have to use page numbers from it. The

passage you quote above from page 13 of the Berkley edition spans pages 13 and 14 in the Orb edition.)

Page Time/Place

1 Weer's house in the present

3 Dr. Van Ness's waiting room (Weer is about 40-45?)

4 Weer's childhood home at the time of his 5th birthday party 6-7 Weer returns to his house in the present 8 Back to Weer's 5th birthday 10 Weer's childhood home at some unspecified time in the kitchen

listening to Hannah

12 Dr. Van Ness's office, seemingly at the same time as on p. 3 13 Back to the birthday party

13-14 The quoted passage in Weer's house, back in the present

I have not done justice to the intricate structure of this first brief part of the book. There are two or three short passages I have left out where Weer's attention returns to the "present," as if he is just reminiscing about his past. But the idea that we are just reading reminiscences seems to be contradicted when the Weer in the past talks as if he is a visitor from the future.

But, leaving all this aside, I think there is textual evidence that Weer is addressing the ladies at his fifth birthday party. On p. 5 we see this: "There is a white Pekinese as big as a spaniel at her feet, and it snarls when anyone comes too near. (Laugh, ladies, but Ming-Sno will bite.)" It is not clear who made this remark (perhaps Weer is recalling something his Aunt Olivia said), but it is obviously addressed to the ladies at Weer's 5th birthday party. It seems clear to me that when Weer echoes the word "ladies" later he is referring to the same group of people.

When Weer does address his readers in *_Peace_* he talks directly to us, most of the time implicitly, but on p. 83, directly. "(Have you never thought as you read that months may lie between any pair of words?)" I find *_Peace_* much more coherent if Weer always addresses his readers consistently, rather than sometimes deciding to address them in the third person and as if they are all female.

You say that my interpretation (and Adam's) "involves a level of incoherency [on Weer's part] where he simply cannot distinguish between the porch and the party." Obviously, I disagree. In my view, Weer's mind has just returned from his 5th birthday party back to the "present" and he is addressing the people he has just (in effect) left, quite as he or I (or perhaps even you) might make a remark to someone who has just left the room, even if we are sure he or she cannot hear us any longer.

I am sure that this was a lengthy (and boring) exercise in futility, but when I tell someone he is dead wrong, I like to try to explain why.

William Ansley

Adam Stephanides — 08 Dec 2000, 11:17 · follows William Ansley

An excellent post; I was going to defend my position, but you do it better than I would have. There are just a couple of amendments I would make.

William Ansley wrote:

At 1:42 PM -0800 12/6/00, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Adam Stephanides wrote:

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[snip]

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I would analyze it a bit differently. I think that when Weer's mind is in the "past" he remains aware of his "present" situation; this is how he is able to move back and forth at will, here and on p. 12 of H & R ("I stand, holding on to the mantel..."). Conversely, in this paragraph, although his attention has turned to the "present" situation, his mind is still simultaneously at the birthday party (and at Van Ness's office!). So the "ladies" of the birthday party he is addressing are present, though in another compartment of his mind, so to speak. It's a small point, but I think it's important to figure out, as best we can, what exactly is going on in the course of Weer's narration.

In the further interests of exactitude, an even smaller point:

But, leaving all this aside, I think there is textual evidence that Weer is addressing the ladies at his fifth birthday party. On p. 5 we see this: "There is a white Pekinese as big as a spaniel at her feet, and it snarls when anyone comes too near. (Laugh, ladies, but Ming-Sno will bite.)" It is not clear who made this remark (perhaps Weer is recalling something his Aunt Olivia said)

Could be, but I don't recall any other instances of Weer echoing another person's remark without indicating he's doing so; and I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be an aside by the present-day Weer, rhetorically addressed to the "ladies." Of course, this doesn't affect your argument.

--Adam

William Ansley — 08 Dec 2000, 23:57 · follows Adam Stephanides

At 11:17 AM -0800 12/8/00, Adam Stephanides wrote:

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Thank you, but I'm sure you would have done just as well, if not better.

William Ansley wrote:

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Very neat. This hypothesis is much better my "Weer's mind as a single point travelling through time" idea, if only because it allows for a much neater explanation of all the sudden shifts in the text.

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You know, I actually have always read this parenthetical remark as just that, "an aside by the present-day Weer, rhetorically addressed to the 'ladies.'" But, I confused myself by thinking about it too much and offered a weak alternative.

But I did say "perhaps."

William Ansley

Adam Stephanides — 09 Dec 2000, 10:42 · follows William Ansley

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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I think we pretty much agree on what elements of your model are and are not grounded in the text (I've snipped the ones you say are not). I agree Weer's death is grounded in the text; he is evidently going over his life; and the title, combined with the ending, do make it reasonable to infer that Weer is seeking peace. I don't believe, however, that they are grounds for inferring that "peace" is an achievable goal, or that the way to reach it is through "repentance."

But I don't think that these grounded elements, taken by themselves, are enough to constitute "a coherent and consistent model." At any rate, they are too general to be of much help in explaining the mysteries of Weer's present situation, which is what we want a model for.

--Adam