

Wolfe a conservative writer? (was Re: (urth) Grounded in the text?)

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 08 Dec 2000

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2493>

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Adam Stephanides — 08 Dec 2000, 12:37

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Adam Stephanides wrote:

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...").

By "deconstructing the act of narration," I don't mean just that Wolfe specifies the circumstances of narration, which as you point out is commonplace. I mean that he also uses this specification to call into questions the conventions for reading narrative which I referred to in my original post. Aside from PEACE, examples I'm thinking of are the point in TBotNS where Severian says to his readers words to the effect of "no doubt you're wondering how I'm able to repeat all these conversations verbatim," when of course we haven't been wondering because one of the conventions is that narrators can do this; and the revelation at the end of TBotLS. While I haven't read a lot of Lovecraft, I doubt that he does this; I doubt, for instance, that he expects his readers to ask how his narrator can produce a full and accurate account when in imminent danger from unspeakable monsters.

And, to anticipate a point you may be about to make, I'm aware that there are a few mystery novels in which what appears to be a reliable narrator is ultimately revealed as unreliable. But in the examples I know of, the conventions are "recuperated" by having either the same or another narrator correct the first narration and give a reliable account. Wolfe doesn't offer such reassurances in the examples I give. (Severian, of course, gives an explanation for why he can repeat conversations verbatim, but this doesn't (shouldn't) put the reader fully at ease, because now he/she has to wonder if Severian's explanation is true, especially with the other funny things going on in his narrative.)

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."

While in some circles the modernists may be considered passe, their aims (as opposed to isolated techniques) are still not accepted by the broad reading public, and even the average "literary" novel published today, I would suspect, is closer in aims and technique to Balzac or George Eliot than to *THE SOUND AND THE FURY* or *ULYSSES*. In any case, a "very conservative" writer (your words) would reject the modernists, rather than imitating them. And I think that in some ways *PEACE* goes beyond the modernist works of the 1920s.

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.

If this counts as "putting the story first," then the contrast between "putting the story first" and postmodernism disappears. Indeed, one of postmodernism's characteristic features is to emphasize "the process by which some events are related" over "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.

And for this very reason, that prototypical postmodernist John Barth has also adopted the *_Thousand Nights and a Night_* as a model. Not to mention the postmodernist tour de force *THE ARABIAN NIGHTMARE* by Robert Irwin (whose book on *_The Thousand Nights and a Night_*, entitled something like *THE ARABIAN NIGHTS: A COMPANION*, I highly recommend).

--Adam

Alex David Groce — 08 Dec 2000, 13:22 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam wrote:

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Hmmm... This seems to bring us back to the whole question of how to know postmodernism (and without the aid of a SF oracle like Damon Knight's finger). Barth I will agree is

postmodernist. But notice that Wolfe, while he write about stories being told, telling themselves, etc., never (AFAIK) does the kind of metafictional introduction of himself that Barth does (in *_Chimera_*, for example). Wolfe's stories and novels are often, like Nabokov's, "the documents in the case," with internal discussion of how they came to be written. But Nabokov is more often, in my experience, considered a modernist than a postmodernist. Use of the 1001 Nights does not a postmodernist make--Proust and R. A. Lafferty are both frequent travelers to that territory, and Proust is a modernist and Lafferty is whatever on earth Lafferty is. I'll agree that *THE ARABIAN NIGHTMARE* and *PEACE* have a *_lot_* in common (though aiming at rather opposite visions, I think). What makes *THE ARABIAN NIGHTMARE* postmodernist rather than modernist?

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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