

Scattered Shot

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 08 Dec 2000

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 08 Dec 2000, 12:41

Mass responses to the digest; I'm on deadlines & don't have time for close argument.

David aka viscacha:

If you're going to make Monty Python references around here, oughtn't they at least to involve Dennis Moore?

"This is the Lupine Express, is it not...?"

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Spectacled Bear:

Thanks for the list of CASTLEVIEW questions. I'll have to reread it soon and look at them again. (Meanwhile my STRANGE TRAVELLERS finally arrived in the mail -- I didn't advance order, because I usually prefer to buy from "The Other Change of Hobbit," but somehow every time I went there they were sold out, so I finally gave in and had them ship me one.

What a neat cover! Think I'll save it for holiday reading...)

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David Duffy:

I think _Peace_ is definitely _modern_ in that sense. The logic, such as in the example above, is dream logic, and the modernists were all influenced by psychoanalysis.

Good point -- but then, "dream logic" leads straight to Lewis Carroll and FINNEGANS WAKE...

"Who knows what dreams may come" is relevant to the common model of confused ghosts working through all that difficult material before they "wake up".

"In death, what dreams may come:" Hamlet's soliloquy on the possibility of kakking himself. My PEACE is not handy; does he quote it in there somewhere...

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William Ansley:

I can't let this pass without comment. I am sure I won't change your mind Dan'l,

... it's a poor sort of a mind that can't be changed ...

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 [ladies at the party].

I thought all three possibilities were reasonable but not equally coherent.

I really have no idea what you mean when you say choice number 1 is the most 'coherent.'

I meant that it seemed to involve the smallest amount of assumption and contradiction. In fact, you have convinced me that #3 does.

We have a book written by a dead man who doesn't know he is dead,

"Doesn't know" is ex hypothesi but may be too strong: "doesn't seem to know." In fact, I'd be equally willing to posit "knows but refuses to admit even to himself."

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.

Does Weer ever seem to think that anything is unusual... (Serious question; with the text not before me, I don't recall.) I mean Weer- the-narrator, not Weer-the-memory. This is one of the reasons I vaguely suspect that PEACE is a stage in a longer cycle of remembering and reconstructing/repenting: he seems almost affectless about the things he remembers/reexperiences/whatever.

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.

I think this is remarkably important, & have commented on it before. Not only is Weer not just reminiscing, he knows that he is not just reminiscing. Possibilities:

1. He imagines going back in time and talking to these people.

I find this a dull option.

2. He hallucinates same. Duller still.

3. He actually does do this. Certainly interesting, a time-travelling (or -unstuck) ghost; but can it be supported?

If he does travel back in time and take control of his earlier self the way he seems to several times, I think he'd have been committed.

4. Variant on above (and on "Chinese pillow" interpretation of PEACE): throughout his life he has had "flashforwards" to the time when he needs to consult a doctor though dead; rather than later-Weer "possessing" younger-Weer, younger-Weer "channels" for later-Weer.

5. He is presented with the appearance of going-back and interacting with his past. This is the "Purgatory" option in full bloom, and my first choice.

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.)"

That is sufficient for me, and I am embarrassed not to have caught it myself; I've certainly noticed the passage before.

I guess I got carried away -- I'm semi-desperate to work out why and for whom Weer (believes he) is writing. I think this is as important as the "Time of Narration," which I hold as settled beyond reasonable argument: He's narrating From Beyond The Grave.

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Adam Stephanides:

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;

Actually his "past" seems to somewhat influence the structure of his "present," so that his childhood memories are remembered on the porch and his presidency in the office. Where in the "memory house" he seems to flow with when in his life he is mostly remembering. Or maybe the other way around -- when he's in the office, it's easiest for him to remember his presidency?

Well, that's another point to investigate further -- purely from a memorious overview of the book, though, it seems to work; porch and outdoors for childhood, various hallways and rooms for main adult life, office for presidency/older age. Something like that, with variations and elaborations.

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Adam Stephanides also wrote:

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.

Even that is not quite how I understand "deconstruction" -- I would understand it to mean using those conventions precisely in a way that they call their own constitution into question, i.e., letting the construction to de-construct itself: but my understanding of "deconstruction" is largely based on the Derridean non-synthesis, so I tend to look for hinges and difference-deference and the like.

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.

No; he seems to take it for granted (and expect us to) that his narrators stick to their desks, writing to the end, even when the writing turns into gibbering. Really, now, has anyone in the history of the Universe gibbered hysterically in writing? Pfui! Even as a twelve-year-old, when I first encountered HPL, it bothered me; I couldn't believe then and can't believe now that he actually intended us to believe this. Yet every bit of evidence says that he did.

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.

Wouldn't think of evincing these; that's a mystery convention in itself and not relevant outside the over/under-defined bounds of the crime "genre." It's basic to the mystery genre that when the story is over all is revealed at least semi-openly, at least to the reader; that is clearly not Wolfe's technic.

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.

I think I disagree but I would not care to mount an argument for either side without more research than I am prepared to go into for this side discussion.

In any case, a "very conservative" writer (your words) would reject the modernists, rather than imitating them.

I do not suggest that Wolfe imitates the modernists; I suggest that he grabs their tools where he finds them useful, and ditto the pomos, and uses them for his own, fundamentally conservative, purposes.

And I think that in some ways PEACE goes beyond the modernist works of the 1920s.

Well, since FW has a date in the '30s, and I believe Beckett got going then too, I won't disagree...

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.

... and your point is? I tend to think the actual radicalism of pomo is highly overstated and overrated; they have some cool tools but no really new ideas. "Truth is socially constructed." Now *there* is an original idea... Someone please contact Pontius Pilate...

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."

See previous message re: the Nights... Nothing new here...

And for this very reason, that prototypical postmodernist John Barth has also adopted the _Thousand Nights and a Night_ as a model.

Someone wrote to me offline, who seemed to think that Barth does not qualify as pomo. I shall let that individual step forward and defend this strange idea him or herself if s/he chooses; I mention it only to emphasise, I don't think there's a clear meaning for either word ("modernist"/"pomo") -- it might even be fun to, ah, deconstruct the permeable bar between the two words... But not for me...

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... or as AD Groce writes,

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).

Now *that* is a strange image... (Yes, yes, I know what you're referring to, but Damon's finger as an oracle... Shudder...)

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

Alec, may I refer you to "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story" or "The Sister's Tale"?

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.

... which is why, btw, I so desperately want to figure out the who and why of PEACE's narration. It seems unlikely, given Wolfe's other first person work, that this *isn't* important.

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.

How about "Science Fiction's other weird literary Catholic"?

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Happy Friday, everyone!

--Dan'l/Blattid

Alex David Groce — 08 Dec 2000, 15:55 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l/Blattid wrote (among other things):

Alec, may I refer you to "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story" or "The Sister's Tale"?

Good point. Still, it's not something he does very often. Certainly Wolfe's works on the whole do not tend to attack the underlying reality of the worlds created in the narrative (thier epistemology and metaphysics, maybe, but in an almost Newman-esque way that is hardly "socially constructed reality").

... which is why, btw, I so desperately want to figure out the who and why of PEACE's narration. It seems unlikely, given Wolfe's other first person work, that this *isn't* important.

Agreed. I'm shoring up my comments till I can get through a PEACE reread.

And, as to what Lafferty is:

How about "Science Fiction's other weird literary Catholic"?

I respectfully submit that Lafferty is a good bit weirder than Wolfe.

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

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Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)

Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department

8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

Adam Stephanides — 08 Dec 2000, 18:39 · follows Alex David Groce

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Does Weer ever seem to think that anything is unusual... (Serious question; with the text not before me, I don't recall.) I mean Weer-the-narrator, not Weer-the-memory.

He thinks his the elm tree falling is unusual, I think; he thinks his "stroke" is unusual; he thinks coming across the Persian room is unusual. And he is definitely agitated when he thinks he hears a door close, at the point where he breaks off retelling Julius Smart's story (162 in H & R).

Actually his "past" seems to somewhat influence the structure of his "present," so that his childhood memories are remembered on the porch and his presidency in the office. Where in the "memory house" he is seems to flow with when in his life he is mostly remembering. Or maybe the other way around -- when he's in the office, it's easiest for him to remember his presidency?

Well, that's another point to investigate further -- purely from a memorious overview of the book, though, it seems to work; porch and outdoors for childhood, various hallways and rooms for main adult life, office for presidency/older age. Something like that, with variations and elaborations.

Nice call.

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Adam Stephanides also wrote:

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.

Even that is not quite how I understand "deconstruction" -- I would understand it to mean using those conventions precisely in a way that they call their own constituion into question, i.e., letting the construction to de-construct itself: but my understanding of "deconstruction" is largely based on the Derridean non-synthesis, so I tend to look for hinges and difference-deference and the like.

Truth to tell, I haven't read Derrida. I was using the word "deconstruction" in the loose way it's used by people who haven't read Derrida--slipshod of me, but I couldn't think of anything better at the time.

No; he seems to take it for granted (and expect us to) that his narrators stick to their desks, writing to the end, even when the writing turns into gibbering. Really, now, has anyone in the history of the Universe gibbered hysterically in writing? Pfui! Even as a

twelve-year-old, when I first encountered HPL, it bothered me; I couldn't believe then and can't believe now that he actually intended us to _believe_ this. Yet every bit of evidence says that he did.

"The Grail lies in the aaaarrggh...."

"In the aaaarrggh...."

"He must have died while he was writing it."

"Don't be ridiculous. If he was dying, he wouldn't write aaaarrggh, he'd just say it."

"Maybe he was dictating."

(Sorry, couldn't resist.)

In any case, a "very conservative" writer (your words) would reject the modernists, rather than imitating them.

I do not suggest that Wolfe imitates the modernists; I suggest that he grabs their tools where he finds them useful, and ditto the pomos, and uses them for his own, fundamentally conservative, purposes.

[snip]

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.

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Well, you were the one who contraposed "using pomo tools" with "putting the story first." At any rate, I'm now more confused than ever about what point you were making in asserting the Wolfe is a conservative writer and "puts the story first." If postmodernists put the story first to, and are really conservative, what writers do you consider to not put the story first and to not be conservative?

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."

See previous message re: the Nights... Nothing new here...

While I left this out of my earlier post, because I'm not an expert on the subject, I disagree with you about the Nights. I don't think the compiler or compilers were primarily interested in the process of Scheherezade telling stories; I think they were interested in telling a lot of stories, and the frame-tale and stories within stories are largely pretexts to tell lots of stories.

--Adam