

Notes Towards a Lupine Aesthetic

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Nigel Price — 17 Aug 2001, 22:37

I particularly enjoyed the extract from Alex Groce's unfinished dissertation on Wolfe and detective fiction. (Alex, I'd love to read some more of this, but for goodness sake don't let it get in the way of the work on your doctoral thesis!)

Alex's discussion of the influence of detective fiction provides a helpful rationale for certain characteristic elements of Wolfe's writing that I have to confess I have been pondering for some while, albeit from a slightly different perspective. Wolfe's stories are puzzling and tricky, and I've been wondering about the underlying aesthetic implied his work. On the basis of his writings, what can we say about his view of what makes a beautiful/good/successful novel or story? To put it another way, what is he trying to do?

I'd like to suggest three possible aesthetic criteria.

#1 The balance of information and obscurity

Wolfe seems to adopt a literary model in which the perfect story contains *just* enough information to let the reader know what is going on, and not a single iota more. According to this view, too much information, explanation and clarity is a fault. So also is too little, though Wolfe would seem if anything to prefer to err on that side of the notional point of perfect balance.

This approach is, of course, far from unique, and is indeed characteristic of much twentieth century "literary" writing. The idea has so often been to explain as little as possible while implying as much as possible, and I suppose if we traced this back we would probably find its roots in late nineteenth century novels and poetry. Sometimes the technique has worked wonderfully well - I'm thinking of some of Eliot's poetry and Beckett's drama and prose - though, of course, at other times it can produce work that is merely obscure and self-indulgent.

Historically, science fiction adopted a very different aesthetic for much of its early years. Explanation, particularly of technical devices and scientific wonders, has long had a central and honoured role in the SF story. Sometimes the author explains directly to the reader, sometimes a clever character, usually a scientist or engineer, explains a point to a less intelligent colleague or opponent.

The so-called "New Wave" in the 1960s attempted to challenge this approach and belatedly to apply more "literary" narrative techniques to the SF story. This has, in my view, immeasurably improved the general standard of SF writing, while still leaving writers to grapple with the technical problem of finding suitably subtle and effective ways of introducing those new, alien, strange or futuristic elements into their stories which are characteristic of the genre but which, by their very nature, need some sort of explanation or description. Some authors have, indeed, ducked the issue altogether, drawing instead on SF's now extensive repertoire of previously defined standard tropes, devices and settings. Done badly, this can be very dreary indeed.

(Have you ever read a Star Wars spin-off book?) Done well, this can still allow for the development of character and for the construction of new and unusual combination of otherwise standard elements. I think that Iain M Banks and the recently discussed Peter Hamilton are essentially SF authors of this type, although the latter still loves to give lengthy explanations when suitable opportunities arise.

Arguably, Wolfe also draws on an established, pre-existing collection of science fictional ideas in much of his writing. Much of his success derives from the way such standard elements and devices are perceived by his characters, and particularly his narrators. Their familiarity with what is to us bizarre and their ignorance of the true mechanisms which underlie their worlds are key elements in the Lupine literary mix. Wolfe's characters feel no need to explain what is familiar to them, and thus often refer in an entirely commonplace manner to what in the works of other authors would be astonishing science fictional marvels, ripe for detailed description and explanation. Daily life in the Long Sun Whorl would seem to be a case in point. Then again, their ignorance means that they are often unable to explain the things that do puzzle them, and the reader may at times be ahead of the characters in interpreting the real nature of what is going on. When Wolfe's characters do explain things, they do so in terms which make sense to them, and which may often only compound the reader's sense of the strangeness of their worlds. (James Russell gave an excellent paper at last year's symposium on the strategies which Gene Wolfe employs in the Urth cycle to convey the strangeness of his post-historic world. This included the use of arbitrary and apparently illogical systems of categorisation to describe society and natural phenomena as a means of depicting alien patterns of thought and cultural assumptions.)

In pursuit of the right balance of information and obscurity, Wolfe exploits his characters and narrators' viewpoints and ignorance to limit the amount of information which are willing and able to convey to the reader. Thus, events unfold and stories take place, but while much is said, as many questions are raised as answers given. Perhaps more.

#2 The equality of location of information

Wolfe's tales, even when not overtly detective stories, contain a strong element of mystery. They are more than "mere" puzzles, because other elements are present and are usually well done. There are interesting characters, settings and adventures to be found, and a beautifully controlled prose style to be enjoyed. But mystery is a key element in the mix, and as Wolfe's mysteries often concern fantastic events, they are major contributors to that sense of wonder which is a sine qua non of great science fiction.

If Wolfe's aesthetic is one in which the text implies puzzles to which only just enough information is given to ever derive an answer, it should be added that a further level of difficulty is created by Wolfe's insistence that all locations in the text are equally valid for the disclosure of information. Significant items of information which, in terms of the "puzzles" presented by the text, logically belong together, may be disclosed to the reader many hundreds of pages apart. They may be given in any order, and may occur in any context. They rarely if ever occur all together in one place in the correct order, and are not usually labelled as important hints, clues or explanations. On the contrary, they are casually let slip by the narrator or other characters, and may or not be spotted by the reader, or indeed the narrator or other characters.

This insistence on hiding key information "in plain sight" assumes a high level of attentiveness and intelligence on the part of the reader. It also usually requires several readings. For a reader to be willing to give this degree of investment, the puzzles must be sufficiently interesting in themselves, and their solutions must sufficiently ingenious to satisfy the persistent solver. More than this, however, the other, non-puzzle elements in the story must be sufficiently excellent

and robust to sustain interest and close examination. (I have to confess that I am still pondering the Short Sun books in this context, not only in an effort to understand them, but also to determine to my own satisfaction whether they are sufficiently good to warrant the difficulty of their puzzles. My personal jury is still out.)

#3 Dynamic levels of certainty

So: only just enough information and no more, and clues scattered everywhere, unmarked and unsorted throughout the narrative. Wolfe certainly follows these two criteria, but there seems to be yet another level of refinement to his aesthetic, namely that the amount of information he provides to answer the puzzles that he sets varies according to the nature and importance of the puzzles themselves.

I discussed this with Jonathan Laidlow back in September last year, when he first mentioned Alex's essay on Wolfe and detective fiction to me. Being essentially lazy, I'll cut and paste here what I wrote to him then...

Any further news of Alex's projected essay?

I thought that it sounded an interesting project, being an aspect of Wolfe's work which has received relatively little critical attention.

As well as the question of the use of the detective genre in Wolfe's work, I'm also interested in the related issue of his use of scientific method. Characters (particularly Severian) will often propose several possible explanations for a phenomenon, sometimes even ascribing relative probabilities to each explanation. As well as using this technique to reveal something of his characters' assumptions, personalities and presuppositions, Wolfe himself seems to carry this technique over into the puzzles he sets the reader. I mean by this that there is a spectrum of different levels of certainty with which the various "riddles" within the stories can be solved.

These levels, expressed in terms of the amount and quality of the "clues" which Wolfe provides, relate to the importance and centrality of the riddle to the story, the limitations of the characters' knowledge, and the "knowableness" of the issue at stake. Amongst other things, this technique allows Wolfe to deal in a quasi-scientific manner with metaphysical issues which do not necessarily allow certain answers. Some "facts" of the narrative therefore have clear, albeit hidden, answers. The towers of the citadel in Nessus are spaceships. Dorcas is Severian's grandmother. Other "phenomena" of the narrative have several possible interpretations, but the weight of evidence may still, cumulatively, suggest that one interpretation is more correct than another. Silk may have a direct encounter with God at the start of the Long Sun, or he may, as Dr Crane suggests, have had a mild stroke or sub-arachnoid brain haemorrhage or whatever. I would suggest that the weight of evidence points to the former interpretation, but the latter remains at least a possibility.

I want to put something of this in my essay - if I ever get there - but you're welcome to pass it on to Alex (preferably with an ascription!) if

you think that he might find it helpful.

I don't know if Jonathan passed this on to you, Alex, or not, but here it is anyway, all these months later!

All the foregoing implies that a good, successful, Wolfe story will contain several puzzles, and that there may only be just enough information to answer the most important of those puzzles. This information will be scattered, often unflagged, throughout the narrative. Some puzzles may only be partially solvable, and others may not be solvable at all. This lack of a solution will itself be significant to the meaning of the story.

The possibility that Wolfe may set puzzles to which there are no answers may be either intriguing or irritating to the reader, but is at one level part of his "naturalism". Life is often puzzling, and there are not always easy - or any - answers.

There. Is that any help, or have I just been mumbling in my beard again?

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