

Barton, Barrington, and Pandora's Plato

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 20 Aug 2001

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Nigel Price — 20 Aug 2001, 12:52

Prompted by Alex's recent contribution to the list, I'm currently rereading "Pandora by Holly Hollander". I'd forgotten just how much fun it is. The authorial voice is very well judged, and the picture of Holly which emerges is both affectionate and amusing. Lot's of nice local detail, as well, from the area where Wolfe lives.

I noticed with pleasure that the technique of translating Classical place names into English which Wolfe uses in the Latro novels also seems to feature here in a minor way. Would I be right to assume, for instance, that "Dawn", the town in which the genteel nursing home for the wealthy-but-criminally-insane is situated, is actually a pseudonym for the real Illinois town of "Aurora"?

I've looked at my road atlas of the United States to check and, yes, indeed, Aurora is situated out on the western side of the Chicago conurbation.

I've assumed, like others, that the fictional town of "Barton" in the novel is really Wolfe's own home town of Barrington. Holly states early on that most of the rich people live to the west of Barton in a place called "Barton Hills". Sure enough, my map of the real Chicago area shows that, to the southwest of Barrington, there is a place called Barrington Hills. There's also a place called South Barrington marked (to the south, of course!), and another (to the north) called Lake Barrington.

Holly states that Barton is "a town of about 10,000". Is that the size of the real Barrington?

She also says that it's "65 miles by car from the Loop."

Do any list members live in or know the greater Chicago area well? Is that the real distance from Barrington to the city centre? It doesn't look that far on my map - it looks more like 30 miles. And, for the record, why is that area of central Chicago called "The Loop"?

Could she in real life have made the journey to Aurora by getting a train into Chicago and then a Greyhound Bus out to Aurora? How long would it have taken her?

(Like it matters!)

I was also delighted to see that when (chapter 7, "How War Came to Barton", p56 in the NEL paperback edition) Aladdin Blue explains the myth of Pandora to Holly at the book sale, he offers an explicitly Platonic interpretation:

"In the first place," Blue lectured, "it's a commentary on Platonism - the idea that each real thing is an imperfect attempt to duplicate an ideal one. Epimetheus had made mankind like the gods, so the gods made Pandora like a goddess. The Greeks were saying that real people are caricatures of ideal people - their gods."

Now, this is gold dust to me, because I've been asserting for some time that the rationale behind Wolfe's use of symbolism is essentially Platonic, particularly in *The Book of the New Sun*. I even pestered people (sorry, Potto) with questions about where they thought Wolfe got his Platonism from - primary or secondary sources? Here, at least, is a direct reference to a philosopher whose ideas (or do I mean "Ideas"?) are, I believe, central to Wolfe's work.

An interesting comment on the significance of myth in general occurs on the next page (p57), where Aladdin Blue explains the difference between history and myth:

"But the real difference is that the events that make up history are over and done with, while myth continues, circling our earth forever, like the chariot of Helios."

I suspect that Wolfe would probably categorise Biblical events as myths in this sense (which is no comment on their historicity or otherwise), and that's one reason why their patterns keep re-occurring in his novels, even when those novels are set in the distant future.

Aladdin Blue interprets Pandora's Box as, "the part of the human brain that's suppressed in the interests of society." That seems to give us the other part of the puzzle when it comes to grappling with the rationale behind Wolfe's use of symbolism: the psychological. Myths deal with archetypes of human thought and behaviour. All very traditional, in fact, and fully in accord with ideas that were floating around in Classical thought, became highly fashionable in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance with the "Ovide Moralisée" and the various psychomachias and allegorisations, and regained renewed impetus at the end of nineteenth century from the theories of Freud and Jung, when, for example, the myth of Oedipus gained, shall we say, a new complexity...

So: the physical world as a reflection of divine reality, myths as the recurring patterns whereby the physical world reflects that greater reality, and myths as symbolic statements of enduring psychological truths.

Excellent! All grist to the Lupine literary critical mill....

Nigel
Minety, Wiltshire
England

James Jordan — 20 Aug 2001, 11:40 · follows Nigel Price

At 01:52 PM 8/20/2001 +0100, Nigel wrote:

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Well, considering Wolfe's study of ancient Greece for his "Soldier" series, it's not surprising that we get references to Plato and Epithemeus, and others, in his other works. But how central, I'm not sure. Wolfe read his Aquinas as part of his conversion to Roman Catholicism, and indicated to me that Thomism is basically his outlook. That points more to Aristotle than to Plato. Not that he can't have both, but how "central" is the question.

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In theology this is called "typology," that basic patterns recur in the course of linear history, which is really a spiral. Of course, here it becomes just a matter of terminology: what do we mean by "myth"?

In Genesis 1, and following throughout the Bible, God creates "heaven" as an archetype of "earth." The earth begins formless and empty, and moves toward the heavenly model progressively through typological spirals. That is, earth is gradually "ouranified" toward an eschaton. This is formally similar to Platonism and Aristotelianism (Plato: archetypes above; Aristotle: archetypes embedded in the world). For that reason, Christians have often used platonic/aristotelian terminology, but invested it with more Biblical meanings.

For this reason, I'd challenge the idea that the Book of the New Sun is essentially Platonic in its construct. Plato's archetypes are mere ideas, because an ideal chair, line, circle, person, cannot really "exist." Biblical archetypes (i.e., the angelic realm) actually exist; just as a father is an archetype for a son, a mother for a daughter, etc. Yesod and Briah exist much more like the Biblical heaven and earth than like Platonic forms and the world. Moreover, I don't think Yesod is more "real" than Briah, on some "scale of being." It is just a higher plane in a created universe.

Wolfe often uses "pagan" myths in his stories, as in Pandora. It is interesting to me that detective fiction is usually regarded as a rather uniquely "Christian" form of literature, in that human beings are responsible (guilty) for what they do (contrast, say, Oedipus, fated by the gods), and in that history can be at least partially decyphered (i.e., the detective can figure it out; as opposed to random chaos of events). For Wolfe to put such mythic elements into a "Christian" literary frame is pretty much what he always does.

I think you are onto good stuff in how Wolfe uses myth in Pandora. I hope this provides a bit more grist for your own mill.

Nutria

Joshua A. Solomon — 21 Aug 2001, 13:56 · follows James Jordan

From: "Nigel Price" <nigel.a.price at virgin.net>
Subject: Barton, Barrington, and Pandora's Plato
Date: Mon, 20 Aug 2001 13:52:25 +0100

Do any list members live in or know the greater Chicago area well?

Me.

Holly states that Barton is "a town of about 10,000". Is that the size of the real Barrington?

Sounds right.

She also says that it's "65 miles by car from the Loop."

Is that

the real distance from Barrington to the city centre? It doesn't look that far on my map - it looks more like 30 miles.

Barrington is about 30 miles from the Loop. All suburbanites use this metric.

And, for the record, why is that area of central Chicago called "The Loop"?

It's encircled by The El. Don't ask me to define The El, for God's sake! :-)

Could she in real life have made the journey to Aurora by getting a train into Chicago and then a Greyhound Bus out to Aurora?

Probably the only way to do it without a car.

How long would it have taken her?

Several hours.

OK, so when Holly is injured, she is taken to a hospital in a "Palestine", which she says is between "Barton" and Chicago. From the map, this would seem to be a reference to a place called Palatine, which is indeed between Barrington and Chicago.

For more on Palatine, see the Long Sun Series.

I've got to the place in the book where the thick-set policeman, Lt Sandoz, makes his appearance, ready to play Lestrade to Aladdin Blue's Holmes.

It's been a long time since I read Pandora. Sandoz was famous for marketing LSD in the late '50s.

bee