

Promises of Spring, or, The Presence of the Unstated

The Urth list — 5 messages, 4 voices, 18 Feb 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3854>

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Nigel Price — 18 Feb 2003, 22:53

On the subject of Adam's interesting "Wintry thoughts" and Nutria's helpful response (I'm waiting to see where Mantis is going before I comment!)...

My previous reference to the possible divergence between the world-views Wolfe writes about and his own religious beliefs was partly cautionary, and partly admiring. Others have picked up and followed through on the first aspect, but I would also want to stress the second. Wolfe applies and extends the science fictional delight in speculation and the exploration of "what if" scenarios to include matters theological as well as scientific. He is not, of course, alone in doing this, but he does it superbly well. Occasionally, he does it for playful effect, but mostly, and especially in his longer fiction, his concerns are deeply serious.

I would certainly agree that Wolfe is essentially a tragic rather than comedic author. His fictions, whether science fictional or fantastic in emphasis, are characteristically dark. Adam's comments on his narrow range are well made, and (Adam, correct me if I'm wrong!) descriptive rather than evaluative.

The absence of, or lack of emphasis on, romantic love may simply reflect his choice of mode or genre, rather than, as Nutria suggests, a lack of interest or expertise. Given his tragic themes, an abundance of happily married couples and contented lovers would be inappropriate. They would undermine the sombre mood of many of his stories.

The same might be said of the absence of clearly redemptive motifs. I have already described my initial confused response to reading Wolfe's books and trying to understand the author's underlying beliefs. Now I've read more of his works, my impression is that Wolfe is doing something quite deliberate with the presentation, or non-presentation, of his own Christian beliefs. I take Nutria's point about certain strategic absences in his books pointing "off the page" to humanity's need for God. As ever, he makes the point well, but I think that there's more to it than that. In the same way that Wolfe, as far as possible, deliberately removes plot explanations, leaving but a single reference or clue to each key fact needed to explain what is really going on in the story, so he also, I think, plays a sort of game of literary minimalism in which he sees how much explicit evidence of God's existence and work he can remove from his stories without actually denying his faith.

This is just another aspect of Wolfe's familiar literary shiftiness, that wilfully obscure and playfully misleading quality for which I and many others here love him to bits but which at times drives many of us to distraction. He hates explicitness in stories and loves indirection and misdirection. In his writing, he is the builder of the Solar Labyrinth, that maze which compounds the difficulty of solution by constantly moving the walls as the shadows shift with the passing of the sun. This puzzle building is part of Wolfe's essential artistry, his joy and heart's delight, and to read him is to go gleefully along with the game or else scream out in sheer frustration.

We're used to his unreliable narrators, disguised explanations and sudden shifts of theme away

from the things we want to know. Well, consider his choice of locations and stories as part of that same literary mind set. Where would it be really difficult to find any obvious signs of God at work? Where would there be the fewest signs of Christian belief? How about a story set in a universe where the parousia is so long delayed that even Jesus' name has been forgotten? Where those in holy orders have become torturers? What about a story set in a pagan world well before the time of Christ? Or how about a sealed, pocket universe, made by a mad dictator and ruled by a family of artificial pagan gods who have devised their own religion and their own parody of the church?

Wolfe clearly likes a challenge, but the game seems to be not to exclude God, but to show that even when you make it apparently "impossible" for him to be there, he is still, inescapably, there, and all sorts of unlikely and apparently inappropriate things turn out to reveal, even if only fleetingly, partial and distorted images of his love and power. He is the Increate, but for Wolfe, it would seem that all created things retain evidence of his fingerprints - somewhere.

That's what I think is going on. Wolfe is a writer of tragedies and dark romances whose delight is to hide clues to what is really happening.

Nigel

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 19 Feb 2003, 00:05 · follows Nigel Price

Bouncing off some of Nigel's points ... I'm not quite ready to pronounce the coming of Summer, but ...

I would certainly agree that Wolfe is essentially a tragic rather than comedic author.

Yes/no ... and likewise yes/no to the original statement that the Christian worldview is "comedic." It depends on what you mean by "worldview." The Christian view of this world is tragic. This world is flawed, as fatally as MacBeth or Oedipus; its degradation, decay, and doom are inevitable. As far as this world is concerned, entropy is the last word.

But, the Christian view then says, this world is not the end of the story ...

Wolfe writes stories set in this world, in the sense that all his stories are set in the Fallen World. The comedic happy ending, if any, are precisely where Nutria located them: "off the page," outside the frame, not in this world. As far as the page goes -- as far as the explicit content of the story is concerned -- yes: Wolfe is a tragic writer. But I, at least, always hear in the background a whispered "...but..."

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That's an interesting point ... and one that I find extremely difficult to understand, especially in the aftermath of the Long/Short books, in which over and over God/the Outsider repeatedly

intervenes in subtle but active and difficult-to- ignore ways. Wolfe, as usual, allows the sceptical reader an "out" for most of these, but (like the crane-ial accident theory of Silk's enlightenment) they generally feel less convincing than an outright supernatural explanation.

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Bingo. Ultimately, I think that in Wolfe's work, God plays, over and over, variations on the "Hound of Heaven" game (<http://www2.bc.edu/~anderso/sr/ft.html>) -- wooing and pursuing His errant creatures, who in the end either give in to Him or (that tragic thisworldview) become the willing instruments of their own destruction ... the former most clearly seen, I think, in stories like "The Detective of Dreams" and "Westwind," the latter in novels like 5HC.

(PEACE remains ambiguous... what does Weer finally choose? Or does he?)

Michael Straight — 19 Feb 2003, 19:22 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On Tue, 18 Feb 2003, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
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That's **a** Christian view of the world. There have been Christians who believed that Christ and the Holy Spirit working in the Church would make the world better and better (but never fully restored) until the return of Christ. (More in the 19th century than the 20th, for obvious reasons.)

-- Rostrum

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 19 Feb 2003, 20:34 · follows Michael Straight

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Fair enough ... I tend to use terms like "the Christian view" to refer to the mainstream views (i.e., those shared by Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and most of the larger and older Protestant groups). I have indeed seen this view -- though even then they usually refer to the restored world as if it were a new creation.

I'm not at all sure why this would have been more prevalent in the XIX century, so I guess the reasons aren't all that obvious.

James Wynn — 19 Feb 2003, 21:58 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Blattid rightly says:

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Blattid responds:

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Crush drones on and on without invitation:

Although I'm not RC I've lived most my life in heavily or primarily RC regions (in NE US and SW US), and I'm pretty sure that Rostrum's described position is at least **a** widely and traditionally held view of RCs. And until the early 20th century it was 'mainstream.'

The position Blattid defined is one with which John Calvin would not only find acceptable but central. Among Protestants (until the last century) this view of the world and how the story would play out may have even been THE major difference between Calvinist and non-Calvinist denominations. That doesn't mean Calvin originated the position or that many RCs did not hold it as well. Although I was unaware of it, clearly many lifelong RCs DO hold this position. But the RCs I know are much less interested in eschatology than their Protestant siblings in Christ.

I'm led to believe that this disinclination goes back to the century after Christianity's legalization. The book of Revelation was one of the books that was added to the canon with *some* controversy. And although it was quoted from in Jude, the eschatological book of Enoch fell into disuse at this time and nearly disappeared. This is because of a widely held belief that the already obvious withering away of the Roman Empire was the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy of a stone (Christianity), made without hands which blasts away the Empire of Iron and permanently replaces it (Dan

2). If one sees this as the sum total fulfillment, why does one need more to the story?

This position became less appealing to Protestants (perhaps RCs as well) when the horrors of WWI and WWII (in which Christianized European nations were central) made it seem less likely that the world was constantly and gradually improving toward a reign of Christ. Germany had reverted to paganism, and all the others were becoming more secular.

So... does Wolfe's thematic use of the book of Revelation in tFHoC and tBotLS mean that he sees it as legitimate prophecy still to be fulfilled or that he sees it as available "myth" and uses it as he uses so many other world myths.

--- Crush