

Being and pretending

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 10 Apr 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3919>

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Nigel Price — 10 Apr 2003, 13:05

Thanks to Matt DeLuca for raising the question of favourite quotations. It's a good idea, though not one I find easy to respond to. This is partly because of my poor memory for this sort of thing, and partly because the general standard of Wolfe's writing is so consistently high. Some writers come up with the occasional memorable phrase, and it stands out from the surrounding text. With Wolfe, a passage has to be really exceptional to stand out in that way.

I was interested, though, by the lines which Steve Case cited from "On Blue's Waters" as being among his favourite Lupine quotations:

"If I need more courage than I have to live, I will pretend to have it and live anyway. I did that on the battlefield . . . I acted the part of a hero. That is to say, I acted as it seemed to me I would have if I had actually possessed dauntless courage."

I have been rereading TloDD&OS&OS recently and was interested in the similarity between the above quotation and the following speech from "The Death of Dr. Island". Nicholas is talking to Diane about the pros and cons of taking medication for their respective psychological problems and stating his preference for carrying out disruptive behaviour whether or not is given any therapeutic drugs:

"Not doing it doesn't do any good either-I mean, we're both here. My way, I know I've made them jump; they shoot that stuff in me and I'm not mad any more, but I know what it is and I just think what I would do if I were mad, and I do it, and when it wears off I'm glad I did." (p97 of the Arrow pbk edn of TloDD&OS&OS)

The use of the word "mad" is interesting here, because in this context it seems to combine both the traditional sense of "insane" and the contemporary American usage where it means "angry". Just as the narrator in Steve's quotation is brave because he acts the part of a brave man, so Nicholas is mad because he acts the part of a madman.

What can we deduce from this about Wolfe's understanding of psychology and virtue? That it is the will that is paramount, that we can choose to be virtuous or wicked? Or that the nature of our will, whether virtuous or corrupt, will be shown by the choices that we make? In either story, there doesn't seem to be any practical difference between the person who does things, whether good or bad, instinctively, and the person who does them as an act of choice and will. Or is there? Is the person who chooses in this way actually braver (or madder) than the person who acts from simple instinct?

Perhaps there is no difference from the point of view of the observer, but all the difference in the world for the person themselves, and, therefore, for God too.

Nigel

James Wynn — 10 Apr 2003, 14:33 · follows Nigel Price

Nigel pondered the following quotations:

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-- On Blue Waters

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-- The Death of Dr. Island

....and Nigel speculates:

Just as the narrator in [the first] quotation is brave because he acts the part of a brave man, so [in the second quotation, the speaker] is mad because he acts the part of a madman. What can we deduce from this about Wolfe's understanding of psychology and virtue?

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Crush continues:

In the same vein, what is Wolfe's belief about psychology and identity and godliness? As he writes in 'The Book of the Long Sun': ""When a demon mimics a god, it can not help in some ways becoming like a god."

--- Crush

Terry Lago — 10 Apr 2003, 15:20 · follows James Wynn

-----Original Message-----

From: James Wynn [mailto:crushtv at hotpop.com]

Sent: Thursday, April 10, 2003 10:34 AM

To: urth at urth.net

Subject: Re: (urth) Being and pretending

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I'd say that the Inhumans provide a telling example of Wolfe's POV on this issue. The fact that they, in some sense, become what they mimic (especially ones like Silk-Horn's 'son' and 'daughter') and that Silk-Horn notes how humans should be as good as they can in order to ensure that the Inhumans take on these good traits (can't give the exact quote, sorry) seems to imply that

acting in a certain way is at least as important as actually *being* that way. In fact I'd say that the one predicates the other. This seems very much to me like the Catholic idea of the habit of virtue...it may not always be innate in a person, but the more it is practiced as a habit the more it becomes a 'true' part of one's character.

T.

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Nigel Price — 10 Apr 2003, 18:35 · follows Terry Lago

For some reason, our wise friend Blattid is having difficulty posting his messages to the list. I forward here his response to one of my recent contributions.

Nigel

Nigel,

Still (Aaaargh!) unable to post so replying in person. Feel free to repost to the list if you want to reply.

I was interested, though, by the lines which Steve Case cited from "On Blue's Waters" as being among his favourite Lupine quotations:

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Without dismissing the correspondence you note below (and which I will reply to), this speech describes the common Christian practice of "assuming the virtue." In other words, we are not perfect in any of the virtues proper to the Christian life, but we pretend we are, and act as if we are, and eventually this behavior becomes habit. Some have even suggested that there is more virtue in acting as if you have a virtue which is not native to you -- for example, it takes more courage to act bravely when you are afraid than when you are not.

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carrying out disruptive behaviour whether or not is given any therapeutic drugs:

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The use of the word "mad" is interesting here, because in this context it seems to combine both the traditional sense of "insane" and the contemporary American usage where it means "angry".

(A favorite non-Lupine quote: "I'm not mad. I get mad, but I'm not mad." The speaker is Troy Grenzer, a particularly vicious serial killer, in Peter Milligan's comic SHADE THE CHANGING MAN.)

Just as the narrator in Steve's quotation is brave because he acts the part of a brave man, so Nicholas is mad because he acts the part of a madman.

What can we deduce from this about Wolfe's understanding of psychology and virtue? That it is the will that is paramount, that we can choose to be virtuous or wicked? Or that the nature of our will, whether virtuous or corrupt, will be shown by the choices that we make?

This is indeed a recurring and very important theme in Wolfe. As noted above, it takes the positive form of "assuming the virtue." It has a well-known negative form, also, which I don't think Wolfe has ever stated explicitly -- but then, does he ever state any of his themes explicitly? -- but which Vonnegut has devoted at least two books to, MOTHER NIGHT and CAT'S CRADLE. In these books, he formulates the negative theme in variations of this statement: "We need to be very careful what we pretend to be, because we may find out we've become it."

The theme is implied over and over again in Wolfe's books, but especially in the LONG/SHORT SUN series. Demons who pretend to be gods become those gods. "Gods" of mainframe, and especially Kindly Kypris, tend to become (aspects of) the Outsider. Horn pretending to be Silk turns out to be Silk pretending to be Horn. Inhumani who pretend to be humans tend to become humans (at least to the extent of having human souls). Et cetera, et cetera.

(Again, as so often, 5HC turns out to be a "practice run" or "prelude" for the SUN books, as the whole question of who is and isn't an abo turns out to be an early variation on this theme. But it runs all through Wolfe's work.)

In either story, there doesn't seem to be any practical difference between the person who does things, whether good or bad, instinctively, and the person who does them as an act of choice and will. Or is there? Is the person who chooses in this way actually braver (or madder) than the person who acts from simple instinct?

The question of free will is, of course, another of Wolfe's ongoing themes, one which Silk states rather profoundly in one of the LONG books. I can't quote it exactly from memory, but it's something to the effect that "Perhaps free will is nothing more than the dignity of being permitted to cooperate voluntarily with what's going to happen anyway."

Depending on your point of view (or existential "fundamental choice"), this is either a brilliantly

happy or a miserably despairing statement; in either case, it's a pretty _accurate_ statement of the situation of our "free" will-in-Time as over against God's "fore" knowledge-in-Eternity (at least as best as I can understand the matter).

Perhaps there is no difference from the point of view of the observer, but all the difference in the world for the person themselves, and, therefore, for God too.

Yes, but again, it's important to distinguish our in-Time understanding, where moments are serial and the future has not yet happened, from God's in-Eternity view, where all moments are equally present and our free choices have all always-already been made.