

Connections between Wolfe and Yeats

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 12 Mar 1998

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Peter Stephenson — 12 Mar 1998, 10:21

As a fan of both Wolfe and W.B. Yeats, I've been struck by some parallels. I could easily be convinced that they are simply parallels, and not direct influences, but they seem to be close enough to be interesting. Here's what I've noticed.

The background seems to be that both Yeats and Wolfe are in some sense mystics. For example, Wolfe says, in Nutria's interview, that he believes the pagan (pre-Christian) powers are real, just less worthy than the Christian ones. For Yeats it was perhaps more explicit: the more you look at it, the more it seems he believed in everything up to and including fairies at the bottom of the garden. I mention this because, if the things I've noticed are simply parallels, it would (together with a shared interest in things like the Cabbala) give some kind of basis for that.

Yeats' mystic scheme, by the way, is detailed in a book he wrote called `A Vision', which I haven't read, so I'm relying on secondary sources.

Point one (the most tenuous, I would say) is oscillating universes.

It seems one of Wolfe's ideas is that our universe reappears again and again in different forms, slightly different, and that that may explain the apparent time-travel aspects in the Book. This recalls Yeats' `gyres', which were cycles of nature, alternately good and bad. They weren't on anything like the same scale, though: in the well-known poem `The Second Coming' (it was quoted on `Babylon 5', so that proves it :-)) he writes of the `rough beast' which is the equivalent (but antithesis) of Christ in the `contracting gyre' which brings the current Christian era to a close. I can't think of an exact Wolfe parallel for that, but it's clear that the plot is not explicitly about Christ anyway.

Point two is Byzantium. Wolfe's world, it is now official, is Byzantine in the literal as well as the metaphorical sense. Yeats made much of Byzantium, too: two of his best known (and most brilliant) poems are `Sailing to Byzantium' and `Byzantium' itself. He thought of Byzantium as somehow the place where the soul reaches its perfection: the first poem describes the soul's journey, and the second its purification (this is a gross oversimplification, of course). He also said that he thought of the Byzantium just before Justinian closed Plato's academy as in some ways the perfect world. It's almost as if Wolfe has taken this up (though I certainly don't pretend he would think of his world as perfect).

Point three is masks. Yeats had a `Doctrine of the Mask', whose basic meaning seemed to be that each aspect of a person was reflected in someone else who was his `mask'; the characters Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes who occur in his poems are masks for various aspects of Yeats himself. He occasionally (but not so often) refers to real masks; there is a poem called `The Mask'.

In Wolfe, we find plenty of literal masks. Severian wears one as a torturer; the hierodules wear masks; at the episode of the ridotto in Thrax, everyone except Severian is disguised. But one

can think of all these moments when Severian is compared to other characters as showing 'masks' of him in the Yeatsian sense: apart from Christ, there is King Arthur in some of the Terminus Est references, Faust when he is tempted by the undine (with the quotation from Marlowe), and other potential masks in the characters in the stories in the brown book (Romulus/Mowgli, Theseus, etc.). These seem to stand in a very similar relation to Severian to that in which Aherne and Robartes are to Yeats.

One final point: the world of Yeats has long seemed to me similar to Urth in one respect, that neither author makes the full distinction between symbols and the thing symbolised. In Yeats, towers don't just

stand for strength, for being solitary or pensive, for the attributes of night --- they actually seem to possess this as an intrinsic aspect. Urth seems to be built in a similar way. The Botanic Gardens, for example, don't just stand for various aspects of the progress or non-progress of time, they actually embody it directly.

Anyway, that's what's occurred to me. i) Clutching at straws; ii) Interesting parallels; iii) something more?

Peter