

academic commentary

The Urth list — 87 messages, 17 voices, 29 Nov 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5783>

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Jane Delawney — 29 Nov 2010, 01:46

Just a quick enquiry as to whether any other lister has read David Wright's 'Attending Daedalus' which is an expansion upon the author's Ph.D thesis and was published by Liverpool University Press, UK, in 2003.

Interesting volume, a full on academic study of mythopoesis and deception (both on GW's part, and, within the fiction, on the part of the Hierogrammates) in BoTNS / UoTNS. The author (Wright, that is) appears convinced that the religious and mythic elements many perceive in BoTNS and its 'relatives' are all part of classic Wolfean misdirection, and that these themes in fact disguise an elaborate self-interested scam on behalf of the Hierogrammates.

Seems to me on a first reading that Wright has (a) overlooked a pivotal moment in UoTNS where the relationship & balance of power between Tzadkiel and Severian are both subverted - turned upon their heads indeed - within the space of one single short paragraph; and also that (b) he has not taken into account the way things might appear to beings who are not bound by our linear perception of time.

Ymmv of course! If any of you have read this work I'd be most interested to hear your comments.

cheers

jd

Jeff Wilson — 29 Nov 2010, 08:35 · in reply to Jane Delawney

On 11/28/2010 7:46 PM, Jane Delawney wrote:

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He effectively says the "evil does the work of the Increate, too" meme was planted by the Yesodis?

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana

< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

Lee Berman — 29 Nov 2010, 12:16 · follows Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson- He effectively says the "evil does the work of the Increate, too" meme was planted by the Yesodis?

Yeah, that's my gathering. I think Wright analyzes BotNS from an atheistic perspective. So there

is no truly higher spiritual power involved. Just some highly advanced aliens who play Severian and humanity like a fiddle.

Jane I think I remember which short paragraph it was in which "the relationship & balance of power between Tzadkiel and Severian are both subverted - turned upon their heads indeed". Is it where Tzadkiel confesses to being an acolyte to Severian in a different universe or something like that?

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My impression is that Wright interprets BotNS from an atheist point of view because he is, himself a devout atheist and perhaps unwilling to acknowledge spirituality in the work of an author he so admires, despite awareness of Wolfe's religious leanings.

Craig Brewer — 29 Nov 2010, 15:55 · in reply to Lee Berman

To be fair, I don't think Wright's central thesis is that BotNS is atheistic. Or rather, that's certainly where he ends up, but I don't think he's primarily giving a theological (or a-theological) reading.

Instead, he's concerned with how Wolfe uses intertextuality (both with other actual books and you might say "internal" intertextual) to create the experience of creating and confounding reader expectations. That's something we all know, and what ultimately makes his book not all that controversial, I'd think. We all know that reading Wolfe with an eye to a kind of "second text" that lies underneath the apparent story is standard operating procedure for a Wolfe book. Wright just tries to lay out a sort of general methodology for doing that with Wolfe.

That said, his primary example is that BotNS *appears* to be a story of Severian living out a kind of spiritual Christ-figure story. But, as Lee said, Wright then shows how there's the second text of the "aliens who play Severian and humanity like a fiddle." That's the atheistic view. And it's certainly there as a possibility, one that has been mentioned many times, and, I think, most close readers of BotNS accept this Wolfe presents this as one possible, even if incomplete, explanation of the larger story a number of times in the story. It also seems like a step one has to go through when interpreting the text.

The problem, as I see it, is that Wright pretty much stops there. Many people, and Wolfe included, I would think, want to say that there's yet a third "text" which is the story of how the Hierodules are still carrying out a divine plan, even if they think they're just manipulating everything else. That's the idea we've hashed out so often in this list where "evil" turns out to be used for "good," etc. Ultimately, I think that Wright's sense of how Wolfe manipulates a reader's expectations with stories-within-stories still fits this interpretation.

In other words, Wright is ultimately giving a methodological reading of Wolfe. And it's one that I think a majority of readers would agree with. But his primary interpretive example just doesn't go far enough, even on his own terms.

This is particularly problematic when he gets to Long Sun. It seems to me that Long Sun makes it patently clear from the beginning that what we're going to see is how true revelation, Silk's vision, has to be understood through a "fallen" mythology. That seems to be the entire stated point of Long Sun, especially given the relative directness of the first chapter compared to the opening of BotNS. But Wright largely ignores this and, instead, focuses on how Pas has created a false religion. That entire part of his book just seemed clumsy to me as if he was blatantly

ignoring aspects of other books that would complicate what came before.

I'm also a bit mystified about why Wright took the angle he did when Wolfe has been so straightforward about his own religious beliefs. Wright just never addresses it. Granted, not every book that Wolfe writes has to be completely consistent with his own beliefs. One can make stuff up and lie in fiction, after all. But, if I recall correctly, Wright never even addresses why Wolfe, a believer, might have written a book that, according to Wright, is all about how beliefs are ultimately lies.

Anyway...I learned a lot from Wright's book, even if I found it incredibly frustrating at times. Like I said, I think he's good as far as he goes, but he's only finished half of the job. He needs to go further and ask himself how his own interpretation could itself still be an "artifice" (his term) used to deceive the reader and make him think and read even more closely.

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To: urth at lists.urth.net
Sent: Mon, November 29, 2010 6:16:44 AM
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David Stockhoff — 29 Nov 2010, 16:13 · in reply to Craig Brewer

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On 11/29/2010 10:55 AM, Craig Brewer wrote:

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António Pedro Marques — 29 Nov 2010, 16:30 · in reply to David Stockhoff

David Stockhoff wrote (29-11-2010 16:13):

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António Pedro Marques — 29 Nov 2010, 16:33 · in reply to David Stockhoff

David Stockhoff wrote (29-11-2010 16:13):

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Son of Witz — 29 Nov 2010, 18:03 · in reply to Craig Brewer

Good post Brewer.

I stopped reading Attending Daedalus at a point. It felt like he was missing the point to me, by not getting to that "third text" you mention.

Regarding whether the Heiogrammates and Heirodules serve God, has been answered here, as in the Cock and Eagle story. They guess at God's will, and even evil serves him.

However, the central theme of Resurrection / Death and the cyclical nature of time and creation, gets overlooked when we read this 'second text' interpreting the Heiogrammates as 'just some twisted robots playing eugenics on their creators.' it doesn't matter that they are robots. What matters, in the metaphor, is this cyclical inversion of causality. We create them so they can recreate us so we can create them so they can recreate us so we can create them so they can recreate us so we can create them so they can recreate us so we can create them so they can recreate us. And so on.

Forget ye not the Amphisbaena!

~Son of Witz.

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David Stockhoff — 29 Nov 2010, 18:14 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

Why?

On 11/29/2010 11:30 AM, António Pedro Marques wrote:

David Stockhoff wrote (29-11-2010 16:13):

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António Pedro Marques — 29 Nov 2010, 18:29 · in reply to David Stockhoff

David Stockhoff wrote (29-11-2010 18:14):

Why?

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<http://www.avast.com>

avast! Antivirus: Outbound message clean.
Virus Database (VPS): 101129-1, 11/29/2010
Tested on: 11/29/2010 1:14:11 PM
avast! - copyright (c) 1988-2010 AVAST Software.

David Stockhoff — 29 Nov 2010, 19:01 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

I suppose that's as good a guess as any, but I'm guessing that you are guessing, Antonio. Perhaps you think his atheism got in the way? I don't see why---my atheism doesn't get in my way. But that's still a valid guess.

I'll rephrase my remark: It seems odd that Wright would be a student of literature and a fan of Wolfe and not be able to see what Wolfe does with mythology/fantasy and what he does with narrative itself, and see where they lead. The patterns are clear: the trees form a forest whose shape can be seen.

There are so many writers of classic science fiction who are Jewish, and their work could almost be called atheistic. Wolfe obviously is not one of them. Reading Wolfe as a whole leaves one little opportunity to miss the forest.

Let me make my own guess: Wright is uncomfortable dealing with authorial intent---he was trained to avoid it, as so many grad students were in recent decades---and so he does. Here's another: for some reason, Wright is unfamiliar with Wolfe's work outside BOTNS/LS/SS.

To those of you who have read Wright---any guesses? Are either of these possible?

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David Stockhoff — 29 Nov 2010, 19:26 · in reply to David Stockhoff

Or, maybe Wright does not fully understand fantasy as a form of literature and believes it amounts to escapism. It's a common error.

For Wolfe, fantasy is plainly the opposite of escapism, except that he enjoys his material and probably gets to escape into it while he writes.

On 11/29/2010 2:01 PM, David Stockhoff wrote:

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Lee Berman — 29 Nov 2010, 19:49 · follows David Stockhoff

Agreed, great post Craig!

Regarding Wright's failure to fully realize the deceptions within deceptions:

David Stockhoff: Why?

Antonio P. Marques: Because it would conflict either with his own beliefs or the rationalisation of his appreciation of the work.

Heh. I am reminded of my days in scientific academia and the debates between Evolutionary scientists and Creation scientists. I remember the snickers from the Evolutionists at the argument that the human eye disproves Evolution because of its perfect, coordinated design and the worthlessness of each of its individual parts. [It is a perfectly bad argument given a major neural design flaw in the eye, causing our blind spot and the usefulness of eyespots, essentially a naked retina, found in many creatures.]

Perhaps here we have the reverse- an atheist struggling to find solid ground for an atheist argument within a book with religious elements created by a religious author.

Below are some excerpts from a Peter Wright interview of Wolfe. Wright clearly respects and admires Wolfe but is determined to make his own points. Wolfe can't seem to help but toy with him a bit:

.....
PW: One other recurring theme that's interested me in your fiction is the manipulation of individuals by godlike beings or powers. Where does that notion derive from?

GW: I suppose it comes from the idea that we are in fact manipulated- and we all are. Some of us are willing to acknowledge God as the godlike power in our lives. Even those who are not- and probably even more those who are not willing to acknowledge that sort of thing- are manipulated not only by God but by a whole host of subsidiary powers, political, economic and so on. We tend to think we have free will and so on. In the mass we're very predictable. There's very little difference between traffic flowing on a highway and liquid flowing through a pipe. They act in about the same way.

PW: You see predictability as the basis for exploitation.

GW: Certainly it is part of the basis, yes.

PW: Where does that interest in manipulation come from?

GW: Because I have to live in this world, as we all do.

.....
PW: The angels- if we want to call them that- in *Urth of the New Sun*, the Hierogrammates, are of that nature. They are not simply good angels, despite appearances.

GW: They are certainly not simple, good angels. If you are not wholly and totally good and pure yourself, and you are not, an angel may be a very dangerous person for you to deal with, because he is.

.....
GW: I want to write "The Three Little Pigs" from the standpoint of the wolf. The original author sympathised entirely with the pigs. The wolf sympathizes with the other wolves and their children and he says, "Somebody is going to eat these pigs- might as well be me"

PW: Again you've got an evil character justifying his actions

GW: He's not an evil character. Is he?

PW: No.

GW: Or is he?

PW: Well....

GW: Yeah.

PW: Well he's just following his instincts. But the thing about fairy tales is that many of the animals found in them are anthropomorphized and they become classified as good and evil.

GW: Exactly. And it's rather unfair to the ones we generally characterize as evil.

.....

Heh! An atheist, socialist and likely feminist maneuvered into acknowledging Wolf's Rights!

Thomas Bitterman — 29 Nov 2010, 20:50 · in reply to David Stockhoff

On Mon, Nov 29, 2010 at 1:14 PM, David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:
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Perhaps the uncomfortable part is the ad hominem nature of this argument.

David Stockhoff — 29 Nov 2010, 22:30 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

I'm confused. Whose argument?

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Just to clarify things a bit, I only said it would be an uncomfortable or inconvenient leap. I can't understand how that got construed as an attack, personal or not.

I don't think the evidence points to Wright being *intellectually unable* to make such a leap, so the guess (yeah) is that he did shy from it, either conscious or unconsciously. I also don't think atheism itself is the issue, unless he were bent on seeing Wolfe as an atheist, which again I don't see that he does. So I guess (squared) that said 'third' reading is either something Wright

doesn't find interesting or that he fears may open a few cans of interpretative worms somewhere if given enough importance.

(I think at this time and place everyone can read Wolfe both with and without Wolfe and/or Wolfe's motivations.)

On 11/29/2010 3:50 PM, Thomas Bitterman wrote:

On Mon, Nov 29, 2010 at 1:14 PM, David Stockhoff
<dstockhoff at verizon.net <mailto:dstockhoff at verizon.net>> wrote:

Why?

On 11/29/2010 11:30 AM, Ant?nio Pedro Marques wrote:

It'd be an uncomfortable/inconvenient leap for him to make.

Perhaps the uncomfortable part is the ad hominem nature of this argument.

Jane Delawney — 30 Nov 2010, 02:09 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 29/11/10 12:16, Lee Berman wrote:

Jane I think I remember which short paragraph it was in which "the relationship& balance of power between Tzadkiel and Severian are both subverted - turned upon their heads indeed". Is it where Tzadkiel confesses to being an acolyte to Severian in a different universe or something like that?

thanks for your response Lee and also to others, I'm just catching up. Yes, that is exactly the reference I was thinking of. IMO Wright either misses it, or chooses to disregard it.

Sort of similar to the reversal we see where Barbatus and Famulimus, so tall and beautiful and from a giant spaceship, take a knee and bow before scruffy Severian.

And he's baffled and embarrassed because he's no idea they live in reverse and know he's The One. Yes, that too - no mention in Wright. He'd have found both these little episodes difficult to explain in terms of his hypothesis of devious manipulative Yesodis who steer naive and none too bright mnemonist Sev into believing they are the spokesmen of the Increate. Actually as we see from both of these episodes, the one I referred to and the one you provide also, the situation is almost exactly the other way round. Tzadkiel and the Hierodules revere (is 'worship' too strong a word? not sure) Severian. They have a sense of time which is either 'outside' or own, or runs in the opposite direction. They know who and what he is, even if he himself does not.

My impression is that Wright interprets BotNS from an atheist point of view because he is, himself a devout atheist and perhaps unwilling to acknowledge spirituality in the work of an author he so admires, despite awareness of Wolfe's religious leanings.

Wright also says at one point that whilst he realises Wolfe is a Catholic he (ie. Wolfe) is more than capable of writing from a materialistic point of view (this is not an exact quote but the sense of what is said). However he doesn't provide any concrete evidence for this which I found disappointing.

looking forward to reading further responses but not sure I'll be writing much more tonight - getting very late.

cheers

jd

Thomas Bitterman — 30 Nov 2010, 02:22 · in reply to António Pedro Marques
2010/11/29 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <entonio at gmail.com>

David Stockhoff wrote:

I'm confused. Whose argument?

I don't think Antonio meant to say anything negative about Wright as a person, if in fact he meant Wright's atheism blinded him to certain interpretations. It's certainly possible---happens all the time, I'm sure.

Just to clarify things a bit, I only said it would be an uncomfortable or inconvenient leap. I can't understand how that got construed as an attack, personal or not.

My apologies if I have imputed uncharitable motives where none existed. Allow me to explain my reasoning. On the non-fiction side of things (which is where I think Wright's thesis is meant to be) a researcher who is unwilling to follow the evidence wherever it leads is considered a poor researcher. It is akin to intellectual dishonesty.

Another way of looking at it. The question is "How did Wright miss/not include an obvious (and likely superior) interpretation that any careful reader would read?". The answer is "Because it made him feel uncomfortable". This looks like a clear case of arguing against the author rather than the thesis.

Perhaps literary criticism works differently.

(I think at this time and place everyone can read Wolfe both with and without Wolfe and/or Wolfe's motivations.)

I agree. Fiction works differently.

Perfection is what happens when you're not looking closely enough: it's a perceptual mistake on the operator's end of the equation.

- Dr. Quandry

David Duffy — 30 Nov 2010, 03:05 · in reply to Jane Delawney

On Tue, 30 Nov 2010, Jane Delawney wrote:

thanks for your response Lee and also to others, I'm just catching up. Yes, that is exactly the reference I was thinking of. IMO Wright either misses it, or chooses to disregard it.

Sort of similar to the reversal we see where Barbatus and Famulimus, so tall and beautiful and from a giant spaceship, take a knee and bow before scruffy Severian.

And he's baffled and embarrassed because he's no idea they live in reverse and know he's The One. Yes, that too - no mention in Wright. He'd have found both these little episodes difficult to explain in terms of his hypothesis of devious manipulative Yesodis who steer naive and none too bright...

Surely that's exactly what devious manipulators would do ;)

David Duffy.

David Stockhoff — 30 Nov 2010, 03:24 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

Certainly literary criticism allows way too much leeway to critics trying to make texts into something they are not, whether to establish themselves or just make a splash. But I see your point.

I think I was thinking along similar lines when I suggested that Wright merely had ideological/pedagogical blinkers on. I doubt Wright was really being dishonest, but I think it's OK to get that possibility out there and dispense with it, if possible.

On 11/29/2010 9:22 PM, Thomas Bitterman wrote:
2010/11/29 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com
<mailto:antonio at gmail.com>>

David Stockhoff wrote:

I'm confused. Whose argument?

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Another way of looking at it. The question is "How did Wright miss/not include an obvious (and likely superior) interpretation that any careful reader would read?". The answer is "Because it made him feel uncomfortable". This looks like a clear case of arguing against the author rather than the thesis.

Perhaps literary criticism works differently.

(I think at this time and place everyone can read Wolfe both with and without Wolfe and/or Wolfe's motivations.)

I agree. Fiction works differently.

--

Perfection is what happens when you're not looking closely enough: it's a perceptual mistake on the operator's end of the equation.

- Dr. Quandry

António Pedro Marques — 30 Nov 2010, 12:38 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 02:22):

Another way of looking at it. The question is "How did Wright miss/not include an obvious (and likely superior) interpretation that any careful reader would read?". The answer is "Because it made him feel uncomfortable". This looks like a clear case of arguing against the author rather than the thesis.

But is it more complimenting to answer "Because it's above his league?"? I certainly don't think that's the case.

Allow me to explain my reasoning. On the non-fiction side of things (which is where I think Wright's thesis is meant to be) a researcher who is unwilling to follow the evidence wherever it leads is considered a poor researcher. It is akin to intellectual dishonesty.

Not necessarily. Where the evidence leads is always subject to interpretation. If anything, it would be dishonest to tamper with the evidence in order that the public wouldn't follow it into disliked territory. But Wright doesn't do that at all. So my view is that he doesn't find the obvious, likely superior interpretation that obvious and likely superior. And not to mention it at all suggests he finds it unhelpful. He doesn't close the path either, he just leaves it for the public to follow on their own.

Lee Berman — 30 Nov 2010, 13:57 · follows António Pedro Marques

Antonio P. Marques: it would be dishonest to tamper with the evidence in order that the public wouldn't follow it into disliked territory. But Wright doesn't do that at all. So my view is that he doesn't find the obvious, likely superior interpretation that obvious and likely superior. And not to mention it at all suggests he finds it unhelpful. He doesn't close the path either, he just leaves it for the public to follow on their own.

I would agree. Perhaps Wolfe's mild taunting of Wright in the interview I previously quoted could be more construed as an ad hominem attack since they were in conversation. But since we here are dealing with Wright only in literary form I think knowledge of his atheistic or socialist tendencies is fair game for understanding his work as much as knowledge of Wolfe's religious/political leanings.

In some ways it is a sign of respect of an artist to show interest enough to explore their personal aspects in a quest for deeper understanding of their art.

Craig Brewer — 30 Nov 2010, 16:48 · in reply to Lee Berman

Just on Wright's "unwillingness" to discuss a theological standpoint: after reading the book, I think he just honestly believes that BotNS is a book about deception, primarily about how religious notions can be manipulative. I don't think he's particularly unwilling to see a deeper dimension. I think he just straightforwardly disagrees that the book, as written, contains that deeper message.

He can certainly be wrong. But I doubt that he's deliberately ignoring things in New Sun that suggest something deeper. I just think he would disagree that they are actually signs of "real"

divinity.

And, to be honest, I think that's a valid reading of New Sun. It seems possible to me to make a hard and fast textual "proof" that the Hierodules are manipulating Severian's experiences throughout most of the text. I'm NOT sure that you can make a hard and fast textual "proof" that the Increate is also behind what the Hierodules are doing. (I would gladly be proven wrong on that point, however.)

Now, I actually think the latter is the case, but it's a looser interpretation that's probably heavily influenced by what I assume to be Wolfe's intentions. Going strictly by what the text says, it does seem to me possible (although disappointing) that Wright's thesis is correct. Perhaps that's because the theological dimension requires a different attitude toward interpretation than simply finding passages that essentially say "and here the Increate was guiding the Hierodules' hands." Perhaps it requires a broader sense of interpretation that involves a lot more speculation and a willingness to allow hints and suggestions to stand as "evidence" of a reading. But given the limits that Wright sets himself for interpretation, I think he's on solid ground.

Like I said before, things change when we get to Long Sun. There, the *real* supernatural seems much more apparent than in NS. But with Severian, there's the suggestion that everything supernatural could actually have another explanation. (Granted, Urth of the New Sun complicates this with its different style of narration.) In Long Sun and Short Sun, though, we seem to be playing by somewhat different rules, at least in terms of how the narrative decides to show us what's happening. In New Sun, however, Severian's filter and the growing awareness of what the Hierodules are up to makes it much more difficult to determine what is ultimately "alien manipulation" and what is ultimately "divine."

So in the end, I think that Wright's interpretation is valid. I don't personally agree with it, but I'm not entirely confident that I could make my case on his terms. If the standard you set for yourself when reading is that everything the author says is suspect and most likely a potential deception (this is largely Wright's methodology), then making a positive case for real divinity in New Sun becomes incredibly difficult. I just wonder if that's the best way to approach Wolfe since, along with the puzzles and the hints and the misleading characterizations, there's also a lot of sincerity and straightforward integrity. Determining when you have which attitude, though, is often more a matter of judgment and even faith (in the author? in something else?) rather than solid textual "proof."

António Pedro Marques — 30 Nov 2010, 17:10 · in reply to Craig Brewer

Another great post, Craig, but,

Craig Brewer wrote (30-11-2010 16:48):

If the standard you set for yourself when reading is that everything the author says is suspect and most likely a potential deception (this is largely Wright's methodology), then making a positive case for real divinity in New Sun becomes incredibly difficult.

...it seems to me that making a positive case for anything at all is very difficult (whether by positive you mean definite or positivist).

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 30 Nov 2010, 17:11 · in reply to Craig Brewer

I agree that text #3 is more grounded in intuition than texts #1 and #2. It is certainly fair for a critic to leave it open, even if I personally see it (more or less as I have said) as counting all the trees and never acknowledging the forest. If a critic sees his task as one of cataloguing, then that's enough. Better than pages of windy speculation.

I also concur that BOTNS is full of plain statements of fact, both from Severian and from his characters. The trick is not just to reveal the deception but also to distinguish the bald truth from the bald lies. We can ask, IF X is lying, what is the deception, and why? If the question cannot be plausibly answered, maybe the statement is simply true, or at least sincere. (I recall Thecla voicing very sensible concerns about the Increate; these do not suggest to me that Wolfe or even Thecla is an atheist---merely rational.)

Another possible angle is one I would not expect Wright to use, and that is to ask, IF the Increate/divine is "present" in BOTNS, where is he/it? Perhaps this is backwards, but again: once we have counted and catalogued the trees, isn't it time to talk about forests?

I should shut up now and go read the book. It sounds promising on a basic interpretive level.

--- On Tue, 11/30/10, Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com> wrote:

From: Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com>
Subject: Re: (urth) academic commentary
To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>
Date: Tuesday, November 30, 2010, 11:48 AM

Just on Wright's "unwillingness" to discuss a theological standpoint: after reading the book, I think he just honestly believes that BotNS is a book about deception, primarily about how religious notions can be manipulative. I don't think he's particularly unwilling to see a deeper dimension. I think he just straightforwardly disagrees that the book, as written, contains that deeper message.

He can certainly be wrong. But I doubt that he's deliberately ignoring things in New Sun that suggest something deeper. I just think he would disagree that they are actually signs of "real" divinity.

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to show us what's happening. In New Sun, however, Severian's filter and the growing awareness of what the Hierodules are up to makes it much more difficult to determine what is ultimately "alien manipulation" and what is ultimately "divine."

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? ? ?

Craig Brewer — 30 Nov 2010, 17:16 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

A very fair point. I think that's especially true of New Sun...and probably of Wolfe in general...especially since so many people see so many different "clues" as "evidence" of all kinds of deeper explanations. Robert Borski is a perfect example. I find his interpretations fascinating but also baffling at what seems to convince him of some of his readings.

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

From: António Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

Sent: Tue, November 30, 2010 11:10:45 AM

Subject: Re: (urth) academic commentary

Another great post, Craig, but,

Craig Brewer wrote (30-11-2010 16:48):

If the standard you set for yourself when reading is that everything the author says is suspect and most likely a potential deception (this is largely Wright's methodology), then making a positive case for real divinity in New Sun becomes incredibly difficult.

...it seems to me that making a positive case for anything at all is very difficult (whether by positive you mean definite or positivist).

Craig Brewer — 30 Nov 2010, 17:50 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

I think this is how many more people approach the text (at least on this list):

David said:

Another possible angle is one I would not expect Wright to use, and that is to ask, IF the Increate/divine is "present" in BOTNS, where is he/it? Perhaps this is backwards, but again: once we have counted and catalogued the trees, isn't it time to talk about forests?

The bigger point of Wright's book is to say that Wolfe is usually doing something opposite and even intentionally disruptive of that. One way to put it is that Wright thinks that Wolfe is almost always pretending to write "fantasy" (whether that "fantasy" be magic, the supernatural, or

even religious notions) when, in fact, he's writing science fiction. He seems to think that there is always a mundane, "rational," materialistic explanation for the otherworldly. (Wright would LOVE LOVE LOVE the notion floated awhile back about *The Sorcerer's House* which suggested that the whole thing was a complicated scam rather than an actual story of magic.) Or if that's too extreme (I mean, even Wright admits that *Latro* does actually talk to gods in his stories), then it's rather than Wolfe's narrators or narrative voice is always being deceptive about *something* (perhaps even self-deceptive), and the reader's job is disabuse them of those deceptions. It just so happens that Wright's examples of "deception" are usually when Wolfe does "fantasy/magic/religion."

Anyway, I do recommend it, even if I don't agree with it. Wright knows when he's saying things that a lot of Wolfe fans will disagree with, and he makes his case knowing that it might be a minority opinion. And I found his arguments to be thoughtful rather than arbitrary, which is what you want when you're looking for a good discussion.

Thomas Bitterman — 30 Nov 2010, 18:55 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

2010/11/30 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 02:22):

Another way of looking at it. The question is "How did Wright miss/not include an obvious (and likely superior) interpretation that any careful reader would read?". The answer is "Because it made him feel uncomfortable". This looks like a clear case of arguing against the author rather than the thesis.

But is it more complimenting to answer "Because it's above his league?"? I certainly don't think that's the case.

That is a false dichotomy. There are other ways to answer which do not involve speculation on Wright's personal properties. I would even suggest that the question itself is not helpful/applicable to understanding a non-fiction thesis.

Craig Brewer has a good post on another thread with the same name describing how he sees Wright's method. I agree with him.

António Pedro Marques — 30 Nov 2010, 19:24 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 18:55):

2010/11/30 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com
<mailto:antonio at gmail.com>>

Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 02:22):

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At the end of the day the fact remains that Wright left a certain path unexplored and that demands an explanation. And that is lacking. It should have been made explicit from the onset.

Of course if one views speculation over a person's choices as speculation over the person, then any answer will look like just that.

Craig Brewer has a good post on another thread with the same name describing how he sees Wright's method. I agree with him.

Craig's view(s) fall within what I consider(ed) 'inconvenient' - the 'third' interpretation is not interesting (in an epistemological sense) from the point of view of Wright's method. Craig may have nailed it, but that doesn't mean questions aren't justified.

In short, I disagree that I am/was making an ad hominem argument. How could I? The only thing I know of Wright are bits of his books and interviews. There's nothing I can say about the man except from what I can say about his work.

Thomas Bitterman — 01 Dec 2010, 02:30 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

2010/11/30 António Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 18:55):

2010/11/30 António Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>
<mailto:antonio at gmail.com>>

Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 02:22):

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At the end of the day the fact remains that Wright left a certain path unexplored and that demands an explanation. And that is lacking. It should have been made explicit from the onset.

Wright's thesis stands or falls on its internal logic and ability to shed light on the material. It is not dependent on what he didn't do except in so far as a different theory might be better, and that is a separate argument. It certainly doesn't depend upon any imagined reasons for why he did/didn't come to different conclusions.

Of course if one views speculation over a person's choices as speculation over the person, then any answer will look like just that.

When the speculation takes the form of "Person X made bad choice Y because they have property Z" then sure, it looks like that.

Craig Brewer has a good post on another thread with the same name describing how he sees Wright's method. I agree with him.

Craig's view(s) fall within what I consider(ed) 'inconvenient[ce]' - the 'third' interpretation is not interesting (in an epistemological sense) from the point of view of Wright's method. Craig may have nailed it, but that doesn't mean questions aren't justified.

If Wright came on the list and said "Yup, I didn't pursue the 3rd level of interpretation because it made me uncomfortable as an atheist", would that be enough? If not, what would be? If so, how does that affect the truth of his thesis? Trying to figure out why he did or didn't make a particular argument based on a personal property is idle speculation.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Dec 2010, 17:03 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

On Tue, Nov 30, 2010 at 6:30 PM, Thomas Bitterman <tom at bitterman.net> wrote:
Wright's thesis stands or falls on its internal logic and ability to shed light on the material. It is not dependent on what he didn't do except in so far as a different theory might be better, and that is a separate argument. It certainly doesn't depend upon any imagined reasons for why he did/didn't come to different conclusions.

I don't have a dog in this race, I haven't read Wright, but speaking in terms of general theory -- if there are important facts (internal to the text or _maybe_ about the author) that a theory does not take into account, then that theory is deeply flawed. IMO.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Craig Brewer — 01 Dec 2010, 17:25 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

I generally agree. Or rather, I absolutely agree about things internal to the text.

When it comes to the author's stated intentions or explanations of a text, though, I'm more conflicted. That's particularly true with Wolfe. Personally, I have to say that any text that can only be understood in relation to something outside of it (an interview, a conversation with the author, etc.) is a flawed text. With Wolfe, if there are some "puzzles" that can only be answered when Wolfe tells us the answer, it's his fault for creating a puzzle that's too obscure.

But the opposite extreme can also be a difficulty when people impose biographical information on a text. So, Wolfe is Catholic. Must every single one of his stories, novels, and poems then be completely consistent with Catholic theology? That assumption sometimes operates in our theories on this list, and it's not necessarily warranted. (I'm guilty of it, too.) I think this is a special problem when dealing with speculative fiction since it's not just the physical world that a genre writer can play with, but the philosophical/theological/ideological world as well.

Wolfe makes the problem of the intentional fallacy particularly...problematic. He demands more

of his readers than many writers, but he also writes in such a way that implies intense authorial control of even the tiniest details. Reading Wolfe is often a difficult exercise in navigating between puzzle-solving and interpretation. With puzzles, the author is always right. With interpretation, that's less always the case. But with many of Wolfe's stories, it's difficult to tell when we just haven't understood the clues and when we're dealing with an ambiguity that requires an act of interpretation on the reader's part. When it comes to the scope of an author's authority, they have every right to speak definitively about how to solve one of their puzzles in an interview, say. But their interpretation of their work is ultimately one among a larger conversation. An author has every right to tell us we're wrong about what happens; he has less right to tell us we're wrong about what it means.

The difficulty with Wolfe is that it's often hard to tell where the one stops and the other begins.

(To make this relate to Wright, I think he's has every right to read New Sun *against* the religious meaning many of us might assume Wolfe intended. If that's the reading the text ultimately supports - and, granted, that's the point of the debate with him - then that's what it supports. It doesn't matter at all what Wolfe thought he was writing or what we'd like it to mean if the text ultimately goes in a Wright's direction. Lot of *IF*s there, of course, but I think it's just really bad logic to say that Wright has to be wrong, a priori, because Wolfe is Catholic or because he's said in interviews that the book has a "true" religious meaning, or what have you. It always has to go back to the best reading of the books as we have them.)

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

From: Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com>

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

Sent: Wed, December 1, 2010 11:03:03 AM

Subject: Re: (urth) academic commentary

On Tue, Nov 30, 2010 at 6:30 PM, Thomas Bitterman <tom at bitterman.net> wrote:
Wright's thesis stands or falls on its internal logic and ability to shed light on the material. It is not dependent on what he didn't do except in so far as a different theory might be better, and that is a separate argument. It certainly doesn't depend upon any imagined reasons for why he did/didn't come to different conclusions.

I don't have a dog in this race, I haven't read Wright, but speaking in terms of general theory -- if there are important facts (internal to the text or _maybe_ about the author) that a theory does not take into account, then that theory is deeply flawed. IMO.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Son of Witz — 01 Dec 2010, 18:07 · in reply to Craig Brewer

I agree with your notion that a "text that can only be understood in relation to something outside of it is a flawed text." however, I don't think that's really the case here.

The ambiguity in the given cosmology supports Wright's reading as well as my (and most readers, I think) spiritual take, though not equally.

I think the person, (Antonio?) who implied that Wright mat be unable to overcome his atheism to see the spiritual qualities is onto something. Perhaps Wright was THRILLED at the idea of exposing what he sees to be a great literary joke/hoax due to the very fact that it is ostensibly religious. This is a standard thrill amongst those who don't believe the bible literally. We love to poke holes and point out where any transcendental interpretation might be answered by more mundane concerns such as sun cycles or translation errors. (such as the Camel through the eye of the needle, which should actually read "rope" instead of camel) None of this though, for my

part at least, is to belittle Wright. I just think he stops short due to philosophical blinders.

But back to the text and whether it needs you to know GW's faith. I say NO.

This book is riddled with so much beautiful heartfelt hope for the future faith that spirit transcends death — and thoroughly understanding of intensely difficult- to- swallow metaphysical ideas. To write all of this stuff off as fraudulent, or simply misguided hope that Severian holds is to miss what this book has to offer. If anything, knowledge of Wolfe's catholicism makes this more difficult, as there seems to be a LOT of non catholic material here.

~witz

On Dec 1, 2010, at 9:25 AM, Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com> wrote:
I generally agree. Or rather, I absolutely agree about things internal to the text.

When it comes to the author's stated intentions or explanations of a text, though, I'm more conflicted. That's particularly true with Wolfe. Personally, I have to say that any text that can only be understood in relation to something outside of it (an interview, a conversation with the author, etc.) is a flawed text. With Wolfe, if there are some "puzzles" that can only be answered when Wolfe tells us the answer, it's his fault for creating a puzzle that's too obscure.

But the opposite extreme can also be a difficulty when people impose biographical information on a text. So, Wolfe is Catholic. Must every single one of his stories, novels, and poems then be completely consistent with Catholic theology? That assumption sometimes operates in our theories on this list, and it's not necessarily warranted. (I'm guilty of it, too.) I think this is a special problem when dealing with speculative fiction since it's not just the physical world that a genre writer can play with, but the philosophical/theological/ideological world as well.

Wolfe makes the problem of the intentional fallacy particularly...problematic. He demands more of his readers than many writers, but he also writes in such a way that implies intense authorial control of even the tiniest details. Reading Wolfe is often a difficult exercise in navigating between puzzle-solving and interpretation. With puzzles, the author is always right. With interpretation, that's less always the case. But with many of Wolfe's stories, it's difficult to tell when we just haven't understood the clues and when we're dealing with an ambiguity that requires an act of interpretation on the reader's part. When it comes to the scope of an author's authority, they have every right to speak definitively about how to solve one of their puzzles in an interview, say. But their interpretation of their work is ultimately one among a larger conversation. An author has every right to tell us we're wrong about what happens; he has less right to tell us we're wrong about what it means.

The difficulty with Wolfe is that it's often hard to tell where the one stops and the other begins.

(To make this relate to Wright, I think he's has every right to read New Sun *against* the religious meaning many of us might assume Wolfe intended. If that's the reading the text ultimately supports - and, granted, that's the point of the debate with him - then that's what it supports. It doesn't matter at all what Wolfe thought he was writing or what we'd like it to mean if the text ultimately goes in a Wright's direction. Lot of *IF*s there, of course, but I think it's just really bad logic to say that Wright has to be wrong, a priori, because Wolfe is Catholic or because he's said in interviews that the book has a "true" religious meaning, or what have you. It always has to go back to the best

reading of the books as we have them.)

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

From: Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com>

António Pedro Marques — 01 Dec 2010, 19:05 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

Thomas Bitterman wrote (01-12-2010 02:30):

2010/11/30 António Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com
<mailto:antonio at gmail.com>>

Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 18:55):

2010/11/30 António Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com
<mailto:antonio at gmail.com>
<mailto:antonio at gmail.com <mailto:antonio at gmail.com>>>

Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 02:22):

Another way of looking at it. The question is "How did Wright miss/not include an obvious (and likely superior) interpretation that any careful reader would read?". The answer is "Because it made him feel uncomfortable". This looks like a clear case of arguing against the author rather than the thesis.

But is it more complimenting to answer "Because it's above his league"? I certainly don't think that's the case.

That is a false dichotomy. There are other ways to answer which do not involve speculation on Wright's personal properties. I would even suggest that the question itself is not helpful/applicable to understanding a non-fiction thesis.

At the end of the day the fact remains that Wright left a certain path unexplored and that demands an explanation. And that is lacking. It should have been made explicit from the onset.

Wright's thesis stands or falls on its internal logic and ability to shed light on the material. It is not dependent on what he didn't do except in so far as a different theory might be better, and that is a separate argument. It certainly doesn't depend upon any imagined reasons for why he did/didn't come to different conclusions.

I don't think this is getting anywhere. The issue here is that there is a dimension to the work that Wright hasn't explored in his generally-applicable scheme. That simply and definitely demands an explanation. It's as if you were solving a murder mystery, you explained to the

public how first appearances could be deceiving, and then sold off second appearances as the ultimate truth. The question isn't why didn't he address further readings. The question is why didn't he address further readings when he's precisely been showing the importance of further readings (if nothing else, to disavow them!). To use your terminology, his thesis may fall on not applying its internal logic to its full consequences.

Of course everything serves the purpose of the Increate, so even a failed thesis may shed some (or even much) light on things.

Of course if one views speculation over a person's choices as speculation over the person, then any answer will look like just that.

When the speculation takes the form of "Person X made bad choice Y because they have property Z" then sure, it looks like that.

Of course, and since it's you who inserted the 'bad' and the 'they have', I have nothing to do with that.

Craig Brewer has a good post on another thread with the same name describing how he sees Wright's method. I agree with him.

Craig's view(s) fall within what I consider(ed) 'inconvenien[ce]' - the 'third' interpretation is not interesting (in an epistemological sense) from the point of view of Wright's method. Craig may have nailed it, but that doesn't mean questions aren't justified.

If Wright came on the list and said "Yup, I didn't pursue the 3rd level of interpretation because it made me uncomfortable as an atheist", would

You seem to be hung on some interpretation of my original remark as belittling atheists. Neither was that my intention nor do I think the issue is atheism - though it might be -, I rather think it's methodological prejudice. Maybe I should have said 'methodologically uncomfortable/inconvenient' and we wouldn't be having this conversation (though going by what you say there's no difference).

Of course, no such standards are applied when evaluating anyone else. People mention all the time why authors avoided this, ignored that and choked there.

that be enough? If not, what would be? If so, how does that affect the truth of his thesis? Trying to figure out why he did or didn't make a particular argument based on a personal property is idle speculation.

Take up that issue with all the people who wonder why he didn't develop his thesis all the way up, not me - I think I know why, I've explained it perhaps thrice now, and I don't think I can add any more the discussion.

António Pedro Marques — 01 Dec 2010, 20:08 · in reply to Craig Brewer

I'll take this opportunity to present a couple of points:

Craig Brewer wrote (01-12-2010 17:25):

I generally agree. Or rather, I absolutely agree about things internal to the text.

When it comes to the author's stated intentions or explanations of a text, though, I'm more conflicted. That's particularly true with Wolfe. Personally, I have to say that any text that can only be understood in relation to something outside of it (an interview, a conversation with the author, etc.) is a flawed text.

I disagree. That's just a property of the text.

(But I think that Wolfe's not such a case.)

But the opposite extreme can also be a difficulty when people impose biographical information on a text.

That usually results in inferior work - because the biographical drive is stronger than the creative -, but it's not usually the religious writers who do it.

(But I think that Wolfe's not such a case.)

An author has every right to tell us we're wrong about what happens; he has less right to tell us we're wrong about what it means.

Maybe even none at all, and even what happens may be open to discussion.

(To make this relate to Wright, I think he's has every right to read New Sun *against* the religious meaning many of us might assume Wolfe intended.

I strongly disagree. If we substitute reader intent for author intent we're no better off than where we started.

If that's the reading the text ultimately supports - and, granted, that's the point of the debate with him - then that's what it supports.

The issue is also that such a rich text can support all kinds of meanings.

But only arrived at through thorough examination. Analysis that stops half way will always be half way, even if its same conclusions might be arrived at by a further, more thorough, analysis.

It doesn't matter at all what Wolfe thought he was writing or what we'd like it to mean if the text ultimately goes in a Wright's direction. Lot of **IF*s* there, of course, but I think it's just really bad logic to say that Wright has to be wrong, a priori, because Wolfe is Catholic or because he's said in interviews that the book has a "true" religious meaning, or what have you. It always has to go back to the best reading of the books as we have them.)

It's just that I haven't seen anyone say that the books have to be read a certain way because Wolfe intended them that way. The most I've seen is that they should be read a certain way because they're richer that way.

Lee Berman — 01 Dec 2010, 20:17 · follows António Pedro Marques

Wolfe is known as a creator of stories with deception piled upon deception. I think the possibility that he, himself, is capable of such layering must be considered. What if Wolfe was in his deepest heart an atheist or even gnostic, believing that God is ultimately the Great Deceiver. What if his Catholicism was a superficial guise maintained to keep harmony in his community, social and family life and his true beliefs are only revealed wrapped in layers of mayan veils within his stories. Perhaps Wright's analysis is not a step short but rather a step beyond others in penetrating the layers of lupine mystery.

I'm not saying that's true, I'm just sayin'....Hm. I remember starting a thread last year called Wolfe as Heretic. I'd better be careful lest this stuff gets taken too seriously..

Craig Brewer — 01 Dec 2010, 20:23 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

(To make this relate to Wright, I think he's has every right to read New Sun *against* the religious meaning many of us might assume Wolfe intended.

I strongly disagree. If we substitute reader intent for author intent we're no better off than where we started.

True, but that makes both seem paltry. Ultimately, intention is secondary to whatever is in the books. I take it that we have 4+1 books called The Book of the New Sun. Interviews, conversations, and whatever else is not within those covers is interesting but ancillary.

If those the primary texts support his reading, then his reading is valid. Reader and author intention have to ultimately be judged against the text. If Wolfe meant one thing but achieved another, that other is what we have. His intention is then nice or interesting, but unimportant. Otherwise, when I was a teenager, I wrote some masterpieces in intention but not execution... :)

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

From: Antonio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

Sent: Wed, December 1, 2010 2:08:29 PM

Subject: Re: (urth) academic commentary

I'll take this opportunity to present a couple of points:

Craig Brewer wrote (01-12-2010 17:25):

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When it comes to the author's stated intentions or explanations of a text, though, I'm more conflicted. That's particularly true with Wolfe. Personally, I have to say that any text that can only be understood in relation to something outside of it (an interview, a conversation with the author, etc.) is a flawed text.

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Maybe even none at all, and even what happens may be open to discussion.

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It's just that I haven't seen anyone say that the books have to be read a certain way because Wolfe intended them that way. The most I've seen is that they should be read a certain way because they're richer that way.

António Pedro Marques — 01 Dec 2010, 20:25 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman wrote (01-12-2010 20:17):

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As I just said, in that case it's not a step beyond, it's two steps short. One can get to the step you mention, but one has to go through the intermediates.

I'm not saying that's true, I'm just sayin'....Hm. I remember starting a thread last year called Wolfe as Heretic. I'd better be careful lest this stuff gets taken too seriously..

Iirc you had a stricter view of the orthodox position that it has, itself.

António Pedro Marques — 01 Dec 2010, 20:33 · in reply to Craig Brewer

Craig Brewer wrote (01-12-2010 20:23):

(To make this relate to Wright, I think he's has every right to read New Sun *against* the religious meaning many of us might assume Wolfe intended.

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True, but that makes both seem paltry. Ultimately, intention is secondary to whatever is in the books. I take it that we have 4+1 books called _The Book of the New Sun_. Interviews, conversations, and whatever else is not within those covers is interesting but ancillary.

If those the primary texts support his reading, then his reading is valid. Reader and author intention have to ultimately be judged against the text. If Wolfe meant one thing but achieved another, that other is what we have. His intention is then nice or interesting, but unimportant. Otherwise, when I was a teenager, I wrote some masterpieces in intention but not execution... :)

Again, I don't think such a complex text can ever support a unique reading. What I think counts is the thoroughness of the analyses rather than the results.

I don't know, at least I am able to appreciate differing and even contradictory analyses simultaneously, if they are supple enough. I seriously doubt I'm a rare case.

And when it comes to some things, there is just no truth value determinable. Say Wolfe got the

name for Pas from three completely different sources of inspiration. One can't say which was **the** source.

Thomas Bitterman — 01 Dec 2010, 21:20 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

2010/12/1 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

Thomas Bitterman wrote (01-12-2010 02:30):

2010/11/30 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com
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Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 18:55):

2010/11/30 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com
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Thomas Bitterman wrote (30-11-2010 02:22):

Another way of looking at it. The question is "How did Wright miss/not include an obvious (and likely superior) interpretation that any careful reader would read?". The answer is "Because it made him feel uncomfortable". This looks like a clear case of arguing against the author rather than the thesis.

But is it more complimenting to answer "Because it's above his league"? I certainly don't think that's the case.

That is a false dichotomy. There are other ways to answer which do not involve speculation on Wright's personal properties. I would even suggest that the question itself is not helpful/applicable to understanding a non-fiction thesis.

At the end of the day the fact remains that Wright left a certain path unexplored and that demands an explanation. And that is lacking. It should have been made explicit from the onset.

Wright's thesis stands or falls on its internal logic and ability to shed light on the material. It is not dependent on what he didn't do except in so far as a different theory might be better, and that is a separate argument. It certainly doesn't depend upon any imagined reasons for why he did/didn't come to different conclusions.

I don't think this is getting anywhere.

I agree, and will be brief.

The issue here is that there is a dimension to the work that Wright hasn't explored in his generally-applicable scheme. That simply and definitely

demands an explanation.

And I say it doesn't.

Maybe I should have said 'methodologically uncomfortable/inconvenient' and we wouldn't be having this conversation (though going by what you say there's no difference).

That is almost exactly the difference. The statement "Wright's methodology does not permit a reading in which spiritual beings actually exist" is very different from the statement "Wright adopted a methodology which prohibits a reading in which spiritual beings exist because he is an atheist and that sort of reading makes him uncomfortable". The first is very informative and leads to interesting questions such as "What other methodologies could be brought to bear, and what can they reveal that Wright's did not?" The second simply speculates on the author's motives, which is out of place in a discussion of non-fiction.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Dec 2010, 21:36 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

On Wed, Dec 1, 2010 at 1:20 PM, Thomas Bitterman <tom at bitterman.net> wrote:
The statement "Wright's methodology does not permit a reading in which spiritual beings actually exist" is very different from the statement "Wright adopted a methodology which prohibits a reading in which spiritual beings exist because he is an atheist and that sort of reading makes him uncomfortable". The first is very informative and leads to interesting questions such as "What other methodologies could be brought to bear, and what can they reveal that Wright's did not?" The second simply speculates on the author's motives, which is out of place in a discussion of non-fiction.

I'm sorry, but this is nonsense.

Is it out of place to discuss why Sarah Palin has written her book "America by Heart," or why Al Franken wrote "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them?"

Even outside politics, the motives of the author can be quite significant to a work of nonfiction. Any autobiography, for example, is clearly motivated.

But we're talking about literary criticism, and the author's motives are clearly out of line here -- aren't they?

I say no. There are entire motivated schools of criticism, as Marxist, Christian, deconstructionist, etc., and motivation is clearly of import in reading those critics. (If deconstruction has accomplished anything at all, it is to demonstrate that all texts, not just those called fiction, have ideological and metaphysical underpinnings -- "we are always already within the circle of metaphysics.")

Thus, while your first statement is necessary it is not sufficient: it is legitimate, and perhaps even necessary, to ask why <critic> chooses the methodology s/he does and not some other methodology. The answer to that question is going to be rooted in <critic>'s ideology and metaphysics.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

António Pedro Marques — 01 Dec 2010, 21:47 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

Thomas Bitterman wrote (01-12-2010 21:20):

2010/12/1 Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com
<mailto:antonio at gmail.com>>

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But is it more complimenting to answer "Because it's
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separate argument. It certainly doesn't depend upon any imagined
reasons for why he did/didn't come to different conclusions.

I don't think this is getting anywhere.

I agree, and will be brief.

(Could you set up your system so that it prepends quotes with > rather than what it is that it's using?)

The issue here is that there is a dimension to the work that Wright hasn't explored in his generally-applicable scheme. That simply and definitely demands an explanation.

And I say it doesn't.

I disagree.

Maybe I should have said 'methodologically uncomfortable/inconvenient' and we wouldn't be having this conversation (though going by what you say there's no difference).

That is almost exactly the difference (...)

Then I apologise for not making it clear in the original.

James Wynn — 01 Dec 2010, 21:55 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote-

Thus, while your first statement is necessary it is not sufficient: it is legitimate, and perhaps even necessary, to ask why<critic> chooses the methodology s/he does and not some other methodology. The answer to that question is going to be rooted in<critic>'s ideology and metaphysics.

Analyzing an argument by the supposed motives of the arguer can quickly go off the rails.

From "Pilgrim's Regress" by CS Lewis:

"'Come, come,' said the jailor. 'You must know your catechism by now. You, there' (and he pointed to a prisoner little older than a boy whose name was Master Parrot), 'what is argument?'

'Argument,' said Master Parrot, 'is the attempted rationalization of the arguer's desires.'

'Very good,' replied the jailor, 'but you should turn out your toes and put your hands behind your back. That is better. Now: what is the proper answer to an argument proving the existence of the Landlord? The proper answer is, 'You say that because you are a Steward'.

'Good boy. But hold your head up. That's right. And what is the

answer to an argument proving that Mr. Phally's songs are just as brown as Mr. Halfways?'

'There are two only generally necessary to damnation', said master Parrot. 'The first is, "You say that because you are a Puritan," and the second is, "You say that because you are a sensualist." '

'Good. Now just one more. What is the answer to an argument turning on the belief that two and two make four?'

'The answer is, "You say that because you are a mathematician." '

'You are a very good boy,' said the jailor. "

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Matthew Weber — 01 Dec 2010, 21:56 · in reply to James Wynn

I think it's in *God in the Dock *where Lewis refers to this argumentative fallacy as "Bulverism".

On Wed, Dec 1, 2010 at 1:55 PM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote-

Thus, while your first statement is necessary it is not sufficient: it is legitimate, and perhaps even necessary, to ask why <critic> chooses the methodology s/he does and not some other methodology. The answer to that question is going to be rooted in <critic>'s ideology and metaphysics.

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u+16b9

Andrew Mason — 01 Dec 2010, 22:12 · follows Matthew Weber

James Wynn wrote:

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote-

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If I understand this discussion correctly, no one is proposing to analyse an argument by the supposed motives of the arguer. What is happening is that people, having decided, by whatever methods are thought appropriate, that an argument is not a good one, are in addition speculating about what led the arguer to put it forward.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Dec 2010, 22:20 · in reply to Andrew Mason

On Wed, Dec 1, 2010 at 2:12 PM, Andrew Mason

<andrew.mason53 at gmail.com> wrote:

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If I understand this discussion correctly, no one is proposing to analyse an argument by the supposed motives of the arguer. What is happening is that people, having decided, by whatever methods are thought appropriate, that an argument is not a good one, are in addition speculating about what led the arguer to put it forward.

Spot on: my implied distrust of deconstructionism should show that I am very much in sympathy with Lewis's position as expressed in the deleted quote. Facts are facts, and the text at hand is what it is and not, for example, what the author may have intended it to be. But to suggest that we might legitimately discuss the work of, say, Fredric Jameson, without delving into Marxism is ludicrous.

Again, I have not read Wright, and do not know whether he has an explicit ideological motivation. I'm arguing pure theory here, not "Wright's wrong."

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Son of Witz — 01 Dec 2010, 22:25 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

On Dec 1, 2010, at 1:20 PM, Thomas Bitterman <tom at bitterman.net> wrote:

That is almost exactly the difference. The statement "Wright's methodology does not permit a

reading in which spiritual beings actually exist" is very different from the statement "Wright adopted a methodology which prohibits a reading in which spiritual beings exist because he is an atheist and that sort of reading makes him uncomfortable". The first is very informative and leads to interesting questions such as "What other methodologies could be brought to bear, and what can they reveal that Wright's did not?" The second simply speculates on the author's motives, which is out of place in a discussion of non-fiction.

I sincerely disagree. The second does not simply question motives. One's ideological and cosmological views are rarely motives. Rather they are an invisible frame on that author's perspective. Wright may not have a motive rooted in atheism, but he most certainly might have an actual inability to perceive that which is beyond his belief structure. Coupling this potential (and highly probable) limitation in perspective with the conviction that he has solved the riddle makes it really easy to guess why he stopped where he did, which many or most of us would say falls short of the evident message of BotNS.

James Wynn — 01 Dec 2010, 22:26 · in reply to Andrew Mason

James Wynn wrote-

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Andrew Mason-

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Ehh...this topic was not really discussed long or in depth before Wright's motives were opined. Saying "people, having decided, by whatever methods are thought appropriate, that an argument is not a good one" (without paying critical attention to those methods) is the same as Lewis' definition of Bulverism: "The modern method is to assume without discussion /that/ he is wrong and then distract his attention from this (the only real issue) by busily explaining how he became so silly."

Dan'I -

Spot on: my implied distrust of deconstructionism should show that I am very much in sympathy with Lewis's position as expressed in the deleted quote. Facts are facts, and the text at hand is what it is and not, for example, what the author may have intended it to be. But to suggest that we might legitimately discuss the work of, say, Fredric Jameson, without delving into Marxism is ludicrous.

Again, I have not read Wright, and do not know whether he has an explicit ideological motivation. I'm arguing pure theory here, not "Wright's wrong."

Since you have been up-front that you haven't read Wright I think it would a drastic mis-reading to think you are arguing anything but pure theory. But delving into Marxism is only useful for reading Jameson in the sense that understanding his arguments requires understanding the premises of Marxism. But I hardly think it is necessary to understand atheism in order to understand Wright's arguments.

u+16b9

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 01 Dec 2010, 22:36 · in reply to James Wynn

On Wed, Dec 1, 2010 at 2:26 PM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
Since you have been up-front that you haven't read Wright I think it would a

drastic mis-reading to think you are arguing anything but pure theory. But delving into Marxism is only useful for reading Jameson in the sense that understanding his arguments requires understanding the premises of Marxism. But I hardly think it is necessary to understand atheism in order to understand Wright's arguments.

Marxism does not only inform Jameson's arguments; it constrains that conclusions he is able to reach, and to read him usefully (and especially to read him against other, non-Marxist critics discussing the same works) requires understanding not only the arguments but the constraints. He is (okay: _seems_) incapable of constructing an argument or reaching a conclusion which is inconsistent with Marxism.

Is it possible that such a constraint operates in Wright's case?

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

James Wynn — 01 Dec 2010, 22:52 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

James Wynn - But delving into Marxism is only useful for reading Jameson in the sense that understanding his arguments requires understanding the premises of Marxism. But I hardly think it is necessary to understand atheism in order to understand Wright's arguments.

Dan'I - Marxism does not only inform Jameson's arguments; it constrains that conclusions he is able to reach, and to read him usefully (and especially to read him against other, non-Marxist critics discussing the same works) requires understanding not only the arguments but the constraints. He is (okay: _seems_) incapable of constructing an argument or reaching a conclusion which is inconsistent with Marxism.

Is it possible that such a constraint operates in Wright's case?

But once you have decided to discuss Jameson's motives for his conclusions, haven't you changed the subject from analyzing his arguments to detailing his biography or excoriating the dangers of fundamentalist Marxism? The purpose of such analysis would be "How did Jameson come to his wonderful/awful arguments?" or "Why are Jameson's conclusions so horribly stunted?"

If you are discussing Jameson's or Wright's arguments then it is as irrelevant why they did not offer some other argument as it is to speculate why St. Paul did not preach Confucianism.

u+16b9

António Pedro Marques — 01 Dec 2010, 23:12 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn wrote (01-12-2010 22:52):

James Wynn - But delving into Marxism is only useful for reading Jameson in the sense that understanding his arguments requires understanding the premises of Marxism. But I hardly think it is necessary to understand atheism in order to understand Wright's arguments.

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conclusions he is able to reach, and to read him usefully (and especially to read him against other, non-Marxist critics discussing the same works) requires understanding not only the arguments but the constraints. He is (okay: *_seems_*) incapable of constructing an argument or reaching a conclusion which is inconsistent with Marxism.

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If you are discussing Jameson's or Wright's arguments then it is as irrelevant why they did not offer some other argument as it is to speculate why St. Paul did not preach Confucianism.

But that is not the issue. The issue, as originally stated, is that at a certain point some authors make some conclusions that don't follow from their premises, or fail to make those that do. Speculating why that happens is important because it may always be that their conclusions do match the premises after all - but one has to explain why/how -, or the discrepancy is real and only finding a cause for it may lay the matter provisionally at rest.

James Wynn — 01 Dec 2010, 23:33 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

James Wynn wrote-

If you are discussing Jameson's or Wright's arguments then it is as irrelevant why they did not offer some other argument as it is to speculate why St. Paul did not preach Confucianism.

António Pedro Marques wrote-

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I think you are building a greater foundation for this issue that truly exists. As originally stated there were three posts that all agreed that Wright's premise that the Increate was an invention of the Hierogrammates was undermined by the fact that Tzadkiel, Barbatus, and Famulimus worshipped Severian. At this point Lee opined:

"My impression is that Wright interprets BotNS from an atheist point of view because he is, himself a devout atheist and perhaps unwilling to acknowledge spirituality in the work of an author he so admires, despite awareness of Wolfe's religious leanings."

Okay. Lee called it an "impression", so he is acknowledging that his assessment is not especially fact-based. But it would be an awfully damning debility on Wright's part if it were true, so perhaps this assessment should require backing-up with a couple quotes. I mean, maybe Wright was just not overly impressed with the Heiros pretenses of obeisance? Many people are not impressed with my wonderful arguments. How convenient would it be for me to opine that they had some fundamental bias that prevented them from seeing the noses on their

faces?

u+16b9

Thomas Bitterman — 02 Dec 2010, 01:06 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Wed, Dec 1, 2010 at 4:36 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

On Wed, Dec 1, 2010 at 1:20 PM, Thomas Bitterman <tom at bitterman.net> wrote:

The statement "Wright's methodology does not permit a reading in which spiritual beings actually exist" is very different from the statement "Wright adopted a methodology which prohibits a reading in which spiritual beings exist because he is an atheist and that sort of reading makes him uncomfortable". The first is very informative and leads to interesting questions such as "What other methodologies could be brought to bear, and what can they reveal that Wright's did not?"? The second simply speculates on the author's motives, which is out of place in a discussion of non-fiction.

I'm sorry, but this is nonsense.

At least if we cannot decide on where meaning lies, we can discern where it doesn't.

Is it out of place to discuss why Sarah Palin has written her book "America by Heart," or why Al Franken wrote "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them?"

To the extent that those books advance claims about reality the motivations of the authors are irrelevant. I don't make the rules about logical fallacies.

One might consider anything Palin says to be fiction, however.

I say no. There are entire motivated schools of criticism, as Marxist, Christian, deconstructionist, etc., and motivation is clearly of import in reading those critics. (If deconstruction has accomplished anything at all, it is to demonstrate that all texts, not just those called fiction, have ideological and metaphysical underpinnings -- "we are always already within the circle of metaphysics.")

That way lies the madness of rejecting Einsteinian relativity because it is "Jewish science", and Darwinian evolution because it is "bourgeois".

Deconstruction has demonstrated that deconstructionists can say they can find ideological and metaphysical underpinnings to all texts.

Thus, while your first statement is necessary it is not sufficient: it is legitimate, and perhaps even necessary, to ask why <critic> chooses the methodology s/he does and not some other methodology. The answer to that question is going to be rooted in <critic>'s ideology and metaphysics.

It is not legitimate. It is a logical fallacy to judge the validity of an argument by referring to the motivations of the person who makes the argument.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Lee Berman — 02 Dec 2010, 04:11 · follows Thomas Bitterman

"My impression is that Wright interprets BotNS from an atheist point of view because he is, himself a devout atheist and perhaps unwilling to acknowledge spirituality in the work of an author he so

admires, despite awareness of Wolfe's religious leanings."

Okay. Lee called it an "impression", so he is acknowledging that his assessment is not especially fact-based. But it would be an awfully damning debility on Wright's part if it were true.

First, yes, I can't claim more than having an impression as I haven't read Wright's book, cover to cover, though I have read significant portions online and read a number of reviews of the book. The portions I read had a lot of interesting and even helpful insight.

Next, my apologies. My wording makes it easy to misconstrue my intended meaning. In my opinion, Wright's analysis might be deficient if his goal was simply to write a treatise on Wolfe's auctorial intentions in writing BotNS. But I don't think it was.

Instead, I think Wright's goal was to write an analysis of BotNS from his point of view and in this he produced an interesting and successful book. I can imagine him writing an analysis of the Bible, perhaps both Testaments, and finding it brimming with metaphor and allegory for the religious, political and military exploitation of the masses. I would not necessarily consider this a "poor" analysis just because it neglected to acknowledge the spiritual reality of God.

I guess my contribution was meant more to explain the difference in interpretation between Wright and others rather than to assign a level of quality label.

Andrew Mason — 02 Dec 2010, 14:50 · follows Lee Berman

Thomas Bitterman wrote:

It is not legitimate. ?It is a logical fallacy to judge the validity of an argument by referring to the motivations of the person who makes the argument.

That is a fallacy, without question. However, I remain unconvinced that anyone here is doing it. If someone were to argue 'Wright has such and such motives; therefore he is wrong', that would be fallacious. But what I think people are actually saying is 'Wright is wrong' (for reasons that have been extensively discussed over a period of years - they don't convince everyone, but they exist). 'Now, how can we explain his coming to this wrong conclusion?' At this point motives become relevant.

Ryan Dunn — 02 Dec 2010, 15:34 · in reply to Andrew Mason

On Dec 2, 2010, at 9:50 AM, Andrew Mason <andrew.mason53 at gmail.com> wrote:

It is not legitimate. It is a logical fallacy to judge the validity of an argument by referring to the motivations of the person who makes the argument.

That is a fallacy, without question. However, I remain unconvinced that anyone here is doing it. If someone were to argue 'Wright has such and such motives; therefore he is wrong', that would be fallacious. But what I think people are actually saying is 'Wright is wrong' (for reasons that have been extensively discussed over a period of years - they don't convince everyone, but they exist). 'Now, how can we explain his coming to this wrong conclusion?' At this point motives become relevant.

The least heartening thing about this whole conversation is that Wright has been deemed wrong or (worse) incapable of comprehending certain spiritual motivations of Wolfe's text

strictly because he is reading it from an atheist's perspective.

Even if it happens to influence his logic and/or opinions about the text, should being an atheist preclude him from deducing themes from a story just because they happen to be predicated on God or gods? That's like saying I am not allowed to deem my tire has gone flat because I am not a mechanic. Nevermind the loud shot I heard, or the fact that my car now drives funny, or the clearly torn up, airless piece of rubber hanging from my tire rim.

My feeling is that the motives behind a persons argument are distantly secondary to the opinion itself. Are we saying an atheist finds nothing of worth in the musings of a Christian? Or that an atheist is incapable of teaching a fallen Christian about faith? Are we saying there is absolutely nothing alluring about socialism to a conservative? Is Wolfe himself not a Catholic who converted in his later life?

Where does it end? I think it is shameful to think a critic should have an asterisks next to his/her name in order to give those who happen to disagree with their criticisms a way out. "Oh, look, he's an atheist. See? How could he possibly understand the religious underpinnings of Wolfe's work?"

I say all of this as a pantheist who was raised Catholic, in case anyone needed asterisks fodder for me.

And to the question of motivation as to why Sarah Palin or Bill Clinton or Bill O'Reilly, or Barack Obama, or George W. Bush would write an autobiography, I would suspect that is perhaps the easiest question yet.

As human beings, all we are is an amalgam of beliefs and codes formed and shaped by others with an equally complex set of beliefs and codes. Everything has an asterisks, everything is motivated by something. The return on investment in going down that habit hole is better served in a court of law, just about the only place where judging thy neighbor is, well, just. ...ryan

Craig Brewer — 02 Dec 2010, 16:46 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

This is a longish post, but I wrote it because I wanted to make sure that Wright doesn't get short shrift. As I've said before, his book is really worth your time, even if you don't ultimately agree with exactly how his readings end up.

I think Wright's argument is actually a bit more robust than those who haven't read him might think. It's not that he would be surprised by the religious reading of New Sun that predominates in this list. On the contrary: his book starts by recognizing that such is the more common way of reading Wolfe, and he's out to show why it's not necessary wrong, but rather an insufficiently critical way of reading Wolfe on Wolfe's own terms.

I actually pulled out the book (it was buried in a box...took awhile to find), and re-read skimmed parts last night. Some random but appropriate quotes:

First, right at the beginning, Wright addresses Wolfe's religion:

"Wolfe's interest in [themes of religious faith and moral choice], which recur throughout his career but most notable in BotNS and BotLS, has led several critics to cite Wolfe's Roman Catholicism as a key element in his composition as a writer. However, while it is true to say that Wolfe has written at least one Catholic story, "The Detective of Dreams," (1980) - a pastiche of Poe - it is unwise to accept Wolfe's incorporation of religious themes, symbols and narrative patterns at face value. As Wolfe himself explains: 'I am a Catholic in the real communion-taking sense, which tells you a lot less than you think about my religious beliefs ... I believe in God, in the divinity of Christ and in the survival of the person ... Like every thinking person, I am still working out my beliefs.' Wolfe's self-portrait is typically evasive, yielding little definitive information about someone who understands that there are no easy or unequivocal answers to any of the questions that may be asked, of ourselves, or of the world at large. Importantly,

though, the fact that Wolfe is still 'working out' his beliefs should alert the reader to the danger of any preconceived notions of how Wolfe will treat religious material. Just as it is imperative to read in the context the allusions, intertexts and references that inform and suffuse Wolfe's fiction, so it is vital to recognise how Wolfe appropriate and recontextualizes elements of religious practice, symbolism and belief in his fiction, especially in BotNS." (p. 11)

Wright's book is then not to suggest that Wolfe's books have atheistic messages, if by that you think that he means to suggest that BotNS, say, promotes atheism. Rather, Wright's position is ultimately that even when Wolfe is writing something that seems to be atheistic, he's ultimately not putting forward a particular theology at all, but, instead, is really just thinking about how complicated it is to think about religious and mythic matters when they're all filtered through symbols, stories, accounts, memories, and even lies. Wright's point, then, would be that Wolfe's writing is less about what *IS* on the other side (it's not putting forth a systematic theology); instead, it's a rumination on the ways in which we simultaneously know and distort whatever we think of as true because of all the ways truth has to be mediated to us.

Here's a quick summary of how I think Wright sees that.

In one passage, after previewing his reading that all "supernatural" events are actually manipulations of the Hieros, Wright says:

"There is, however, an inescapable religious aspect to the Urth Cycle. This quality does not depend on Wolfe's Roman Catholicism, as some critics have suggested [a note listing a wide range...pardon me for not typing it all out], but on his recognition of the power of myth to shape humanity's secular and spiritual life." (p. 59)

Wright spends his Chapter 7 outlining how he sees Wolfe working out this idea of myth. It is more cynical than I think many people would like to think of Wolfe, but I think it's still appropriate. Here's Wright's summary of his chapter:

"In the Urth Cycle, the context is obscured by the source material, a fact that leads the reader to perceive what the text resembles rather than what it actually is: Wolfe uses mythology, he does not create it outside the fictional environment. He is, in effect, toying with the reader's susceptibility to the transcendental visions of existence offered by mythical narrative. His employment of the monomyth [Campbell and others] exploits the primary psychological character of the human species [as Wright thinks Wolfe sees it]: its need for myth. Wolfe thereby disarms both the reader's desire and his or her ability to uncover the disturbing biological reality [that ultimately lies behind the supernatural story of the Urth Cycle]." (p. 124)

I think it's important to note that Wright is not saying here that Wolfe thinks that all myths are lies. Rather, he's suggesting a point that's ultimately compatible with a more religious reading of Wolfe, and one that he's talked about in many interviews: myths can be both manipulative AND constructive, even illuminating, of deeper concerns. Wright simply believes that, in much of his writing, Wolfe is concerned to show how myth can often be misunderstood and misperceived, even when they're also saying something true.

For example, Wright enjoys the story "How the Whip Came Back" (from Book of Days) because it essentially shows both the positive and negative capacities of myth. And Wright is always interested in the way that Wolfe mixes myth and religion in his books and suggests that, even when they're doing good, they're also being manipulative (perhaps even manipulating us to be good):

"The story is important for its attention to two forms of interconnected manipulation: while it

implicitly condemns the human tendency to subjugate others, it also recognises the potential of organised religion to recruit and operate among a people in need of emotional or spiritual comfort." (p. 33) He then notes how the story, which includes a Pope of a dwindling future RC Church who sees an opportunity to renew his flock among a new slave class, actually employs mythic manipulation for higher and even laudable ends. As he says: "'How the Whip Came Back' contains two principal features that are central to an understanding of Wolfe's fiction and of the multi-volume novels in particular: his recognition of the existence of systems of control and constraint, and the mitigating effects of religious faith." (p. 33)

What Wright wants to say, though, is that Wolfe's writing is primarily interested in exploring how that manipulation actually works. Wolfe's stories-within-stories are ways of teaching readers to see how any myth, even a true one, can be used all kinds of deceptive ways. But not all deception is necessarily evil. Wright just isn't comfortable coming right out and saying that, behind all of the complicated puzzle-solving and misdirection in Wolfe's work, there is a straightforward claim of either faith or of which myths are simply true and which are simply false.

Wright is ultimately always concerned with the difficult and always potentially misleading ways that Wolfe tells stories, emphasizing the difficulty of getting things right. For Wright, BotNS is not ultimately "just" a story about atheism because it says that the Hieros were just manipulating Severian the whole time. Rather, it's a story about the ways even deeply held religious beliefs, even the possibility of actual miracles, can still be manipulated for other ends. I tend to think that Wright would say that, ultimately, Wolfe is silent about what's "really" going on behind the Hieros. Rather, telling that story would be yet another story, capable of being mis-told, mis-appropriated, and even turned on its head. In the end, no story is true because the truth always comes before and after the story. Wright just wants us to pay attention to the ways that Wolfe makes us pay attention to how the stories in which we're stuck work in all kinds of misleading ways.

António Pedro Marques — 02 Dec 2010, 16:53 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

Hi Ryann,

Ryan Dunn wrote (02-12-2010 15:34):

The least heartening thing about this whole conversation is that Wright has been deemed wrong or (worse) incapable of comprehending certain spiritual motivations of Wolfe's text strictly because he is reading it from an atheist's perspective.

Who's done that? I haven't seen it. I have seen people say that a strict atheist perspective precludes a full analysis of the work. That's quite a different thing.

(I don't even think it is so myself; I see many so-called atheists unwilling to follow certain lines of reasoning, just as one used to see so-called religious people unwilling to follow others, but I don't see that a given (ir)religious framework absolutely stunts the analysis of any given work. As I said in response to Lee, one may even argue that there is no God in NS - since we're talking about NS - but one has to go through all the hoops first to be convincing, unless one is, as it were, preaching to the choir.)

(Whose was that old story in which an atheist managed to become Pope?)

Craig Brewer — 02 Dec 2010, 17:26 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

Antonio said:

but I don't see that a given (ir)religious framework absolutely stunts the analysis of any given work.

I agree. And, as I tried to say in the summary on Wright, I think his position is that either theological interpretation of Wolfe's stuff (as either atheistic OR religious) is actually a stunted way to interpret Wolfe. His point is, rather, that, whatever theological position lies behind Wolfe's fiction, his PRIMARY concern is how those (a)theological positions get mediated and distorted through stories, myths, memory, time, etc. According to Wright, Wolfe is ultimately concerned with the difficulties and potential pitfalls of how truths get transmitted, no matter whether that truth is atheistic or religious.

In fact (to throw one more quote up there), he says this is even true of Long Sun. (By the way, my memory of how Wright dealt with Long Sun was wrong in something I posted earlier.) Here's Wright's ultimate interpretation of LS:

"Wolfe's willingness to pervert his own religion, as he does other mythological systems, for the creation of a fictional faith should indicate to the reader that the Christian echoes found in the Urth Cycle must be examined in their context rather than being accepted as an indication that the text is some form of obscure Christian allegory. Indeed The Book of the Long Sun reads very much as a renunciation of the orthodoxy and paraphernalia of Roman Catholic worship in favor of the less formulated Christianity of the Apostolic Era." (p. 202)

In other words, Wright essentially says: Long Sun is a Christian work (while New Sun wasn't, exactly). But it's ultimately, for him, about how the Christian message can be misremembered and how difficult it is to get back to the original meaning. Wright is always going to get back to how he sees Wolfe being more interested in the difficulties of the medium than the message.

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 02 Dec 2010, 17:32 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

Actually, I'm not sure anyone has argued that Wright's atheism is the issue. In fact, some (myself included) have argued the opposite: that it is something else that caused right to stop at the brink of understanding.

--- On Thu, 12/2/10, Ryan Dunn <ryan at liftingfaces.com> wrote:

From: Ryan Dunn <ryan at liftingfaces.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) Academic commentary

To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>

Date: Thursday, December 2, 2010, 10:34 AM

On Dec 2, 2010, at 9:50 AM, Andrew Mason <andrew.mason53 at gmail.com> wrote:

It is not legitimate. It is a logical fallacy to judge the validity of an argument by referring to the motivations of the person who makes the argument.

That is a fallacy, without question. However, I remain unconvinced that anyone here is doing it. If someone were to argue 'Wright has such and such motives; therefore he is wrong', that would be fallacious. But what I think people are actually saying is 'Wright is wrong' (for reasons that have been extensively discussed over a period of years - they don't convince everyone, but they exist). 'Now, how can we explain his coming to this wrong conclusion?' At this point motives become relevant.

The least heartening thing about this whole conversation is that Wright has been deemed wrong or (worse) incapable of comprehending certain spiritual motivations of Wolfe's text strictly because he is reading it from an atheist's perspective.

Even if it happens to influence his logic and/or opinions about the text, should being an atheist preclude him from deducing themes from a story just because they happen to be predicated on God or gods? That's like saying I am not allowed to deem my tire has gone flat because I am not a mechanic. Nevermind the loud shot I heard, or the fact that my car now drives funny, or the clearly torn up, airless piece of rubber hanging from my tire rim.

My feeling is that the motives behind a persons argument are distantly secondary to the opinion itself. Are we saying an atheist finds nothing of worth in the musings of a Christian? Or that an atheist is incapable of teaching a fallen Christian about faith? Are we saying there is absolutely nothing alluring about socialism to a conservative? Is Wolfe himself not a Catholic who converted in his later life?

Where does it end? I think it is shameful to think a critic should have an asterisks next to his/her name in order to give those who happen to disagree with their criticisms a way out. "Oh, look, he's an atheist. See? How could he possibly understand the religious underpinnings of Wolfe's work?"

I say all of this as a pantheist who was raised Catholic, in case anyone needed asterisks fodder for me.

And to the question of motivation as to why Sarah Palin or Bill Clinton or Bill O'Reilly, or Barack Obama, or George W. Bush would write an autobiography, I would suspect that is perhaps the easiest question yet.

As human beings, all we are is an amalgam of beliefs and codes formed and shaped by others with an equally complex set of beliefs and codes. Everything has an asterisks, everything is motivated by something. The return on investment in going down that habit hole is better served in a court of law, just about the only place where judging thy neighbor is, well, just. ...ryan

Craig Brewer — 02 Dec 2010, 17:38 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

All this talk about atheism has me wondering since it's been a couple of years now since I've actually re-read it: are there any passages in New Sun where the Increate acts directly? In Long Sun, obviously, we have Silk's opening vision. But is there anything equivalent with Severian that is (or appears to be) something that wasn't the Hiero's doing?

That's probably a difficult question to answer and likely slides easily into speculation. Still, I'm interested.

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 02 Dec 2010, 17:41 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

I think I may have read the story just a few months ago. Frank Stockton?

--- On Thu, 12/2/10, Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com> wrote:

From: Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) Academic commentary

To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>

Date: Thursday, December 2, 2010, 11:53 AM

(Whose was that old story in which an atheist managed to become Pope?)

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 02 Dec 2010, 17:42 · in reply to Craig Brewer

I think I addressed this obliquely in a recent post.

No, I don't beleive that there is any place in New Sun, or the first-person sections of Short Sun where the Increate acts directly. The only (unambiguously?) miraculous events in the entire Solar cycle seem to happen when someone who was not present at the event -- Horn in Long Sun, the Next Generation in Short Sun -- is doing the narrating.

This may be significant.

On Thu, Dec 2, 2010 at 9:38 AM, Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com> wrote:
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That's probably a difficult question to answer and likely slides easily into speculation. Still, I'm interested.

Ryan Dunn — 02 Dec 2010, 17:47 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On Dec 2, 2010, at 12:42 PM, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
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That's probably a difficult question to answer and likely slides easily into speculation. Still, I'm interested.

Forgive my ignorance, but was the actual act of restoring the sun an act between Severian and the Increate? Or were the Hiero's responsible for this?

There is the passage which details the Hierogrammates having to leave one universe for another through a "side exit" of sorts, as I recall, which implied they did not have control over its conditions enough to prevent their having to flee.

I just don't remember the mechanics of how the sun was restored, and the ramifications of the subsequent flood.

...ryan

Craig Brewer — 02 Dec 2010, 18:01 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

My apologies if this is old news. (I didn't find it in the archives.)

I just noticed that amazon has a listing for Home Fires and a summary:

Gene Wolfe takes us to a future North America at once familiar and utterly strange. A young man and woman, Skip and Chelle, fall in love in college and marry, but she is enlisted in the military, there is a war on, and she must serve her tour of duty before they can settle down. But the military is fighting a war with aliens in distant solar systems, and her months in the service will be years in relative time on Earth. Chelle returns to recuperate from severe injuries, after months of service, still a young woman but not necessarily the same person while Skip is in his forties and a wealthy businessman, but eager for her return.

Still in love (somewhat to his surprise and delight), they go on a Caribbean cruise to resume their marriage. Their vacation rapidly becomes a complex series of challenges, not the least of which are spies, aliens, and battles with pirates who capture the ship for ransom. There is no writer in SF like Gene Wolfe and no SF novel like Home Fires.

http://www.amazon.com/Home-Fires-Gene-Wolfe/dp/0765328186/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1291312749&sr=1-1

(Release date is listed as Jan 18.)

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 02 Dec 2010, 18:02 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

On Thu, Dec 2, 2010 at 9:47 AM, Ryan Dunn <ryan@liftingfaces.com> wrote:

Forgive my ignorance, but was the actual act of restoring the sun an act between Severian and the Increate? Or were the Hiero's responsible for this?

The sun was restored by its being implanted with the White Fountain, Severian's "star." The WF was created by the mating of Severian and Apheta, and became his so-to-speak alter ego, linked to him so that he could summon it in the time of the Stone Village to arrive in his own time. At least, that's (in sketch) how I remember it.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Andrew Mason — 02 Dec 2010, 18:14 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Craig Brewer wrote:

All this talk about atheism has me wondering since it's been a couple of years now since I've actually re-read it: are there any passages in New Sun where the Increate acts directly? In Long Sun, obviously, we have Silk's opening vision. But is there anything equivalent with Severian that is (or appears to be) something that wasn't the Hiero's doing?

That's probably a difficult question to answer and likely slides easily into speculation. Still, I'm interested.

I don't think there is a place in New Sun where the Increate acts directly. However, near the end Barbatos claims that Severian's power to recall the dead - in the same body, not in a new one - is greater than the power of the Hierogrammates, which suggests that it does not come from them but from the Increate.

(This might, of course, be part of a deception - produced as evidence that the Increate endorses the Hierogrammates' plan. But if it were, it's rather odd that it comes at the end, when Severian has already served his purpose. It's actually quite striking that the original explanation of the

plan we get from Malrubius does not mention the Increate at all - the Hierogrammates were created by humans or their analogues, and their motives arise from their own experience; 'this is at once their repayment and their revenge'. Severian seems quite happy to go along with the plan on this basis. Later we get hints that it's more complicated than that, and that the Increate is involved, in some hard-to-determine way; I find it hard to dismiss these as manipulation, because Severian is committed to the plan before they start.)

James Wynn — 02 Dec 2010, 18:24 · in reply to Craig Brewer

Last year Wolfe said, (or I understood him to say) that Skip's last name is Reese [I don't know the spelling]. I asked Wolfe whether that implied HF was in the AEG universe. He replied that he didn't think Ries and [Rees] were similar. Whatever.

[spoiler]

Wolfe also related that this was a kind of picture of the complexities of what people think they want in romance. It seems to Skip and Chelle that this is the perfect situation. When she comes back, she'll be married to a wealthy, powerful man. He will be married to a beautiful young woman. But when they are reunited, they discover that their relationship doesn't mesh right anymore...there's 20 years separating them.

Lee Berman — 02 Dec 2010, 19:07 · follows Andrew Mason

craig Brewer: All this talk about atheism has me wondering since it's been a couple of years now since I've actually re-read it: are there any passages in New Sun where the Increate acts directly? In Long Sun, obviously, we have Silk's opening vision. But is there anything equivalent with Severian that is (or appears to be) something that wasn't the Hiero's doing?

I will disagree that Silk's Outsider possession/vision was the work of the Increate. The fairly clear association of The Outsider with Dionysus in RttW suggests this is a deity operating at a much lower level than the Increate. I could consider The Outsider as a possible god of all Briah. But I don't think he could be the Creator of all universes at all times.

My impression from UotNS is that there is potentially an infinite number of levels of beings between humanity and The Increate. A being just a couple steps up like Tzadkiel is at a level sufficiently superior and distant as to make meaningful conversation difficult. The Increate is just too far away from humanity to communicate directly and must use imperfect translation through intermediaries if there is to be any communication at all.

I agree with Ryan Dunn that we may conclude that Severian's power derives from a source higher than the Hierogrammates, explaining why Tzadkiel has been a Severian acolyte and why Tzadkiel cannot restore a dead human being (or dead Hierogrammate, his son) back to life. Severian's mating with Apheta may have facilitated the creation of the White Fountain star but perhaps only allowed access to a higher power for its creation.

I consider that the black hole in the sun and the White Fountain were created simultaneously in Briah.

Sort of like how pulling a plug from a bucket of water creates a sucking hole inside the bucket but from outside the bucket, a fountain is created. The time frame of the dying Urth sun was the time it

took for Severian to carry the plug from outside the bucket back inside the bucket and plug the hole.

This may call into question what I think is a bit of lupine gospel: that the black hole was created at the time of Apu Punchau and that Severian's eclipse was the result of Tzadkiel's ship arriving to install the hole. One reason to doubt the gospel is that Tzadkiel's ship seems unable (because of its size and gravity? or the nature of its sails?) to come closer than Pluto to our solar system. My alternative theory for the eclipse is that it is akin to the other natural disasters (storm, earthquake) that occur when Severian is angry or in fear of dying. Rather than Tzadkiel's ship parked in rotation-matching orbit for half a day causing the eclipse perhaps it was a natural event; and the large body Severian used to cause the extended eclipse was simply the Moon.

Jeff Wilson — 02 Dec 2010, 19:10 · in reply to Craig Brewer

On 12/2/2010 11:38 AM, Craig Brewer wrote:

All this talk about atheism has me wondering since it's been a couple of years now since I've actually re-read it: are there any passages in New Sun where the Increate acts directly? In Long Sun, obviously, we have Silk's opening vision. But is there anything equivalent with Severian that is (or appears to be) something that wasn't the Hiero's doing?

The only thing that I can think of is that Severian's potential ability to heal and raise the dead is a gift from the Increate in the same way Joseph was given the the ability to interpret predictive dreams by G-d. It is indicated in URTH by Sev' recollection of the OT verse describing Joseph's own dream as reproduced in the brown book. The parallel is very close, esp in that Joseph needs help from others (their dreams) to foretell events outside his own life the way Sev needs to draw on outside energies to perform healings on and to raise other people.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
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Roy C. Lackey — 02 Dec 2010, 19:29 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l wrote:

No, I don't beleive that there is any place in New Sun, or the first-person sections of Short Sun where the Increate acts directly. The only (unambiguously?) miraculous events in the entire Solar cycle seem to happen when someone who was not present at the event -- Horn in Long Sun, the Next Generation in Short Sun -- is doing the narrating.

This may be significant.

If you grant that Silk's enlightenments were supernatural and came from the Outsider -- known as the Increate in NS -- then Silkhorn professed an encounter with the Outsider when he prayed and sacrificed (bread and wine) at an old Neighbor altar on a hill near Blanko. See chapter 19 of IGJ, particularly pages 284-85. Nothing tangible happened, but the context makes it quite clear to me -- an unbeliever -- that this incident is evocative of the Christian God and was intended to

be perceived as such.

-Roy

Son of Witz — 02 Dec 2010, 19:43 · in reply to Lee Berman

On Dec 2, 2010, at 11:07 AM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:
I will disagree that Silk's Outsider possession/vision was the work of the Increate. The fairly clear association of The Outsider with Dionysus in RttW suggests this is a deity operating at a much lower level than the Increate. I could consider The Outsider as a possible god of all Bria. But I don't think he could be the Creator of all universes at all times.

I think it's perfectly clear that the Outsider is Christ or logos. He's presented as the REAL diety outside of the false Pantheon.

Jeff Wilson — 02 Dec 2010, 20:44 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

On 12/2/2010 11:47 AM, Ryan Dunn wrote:
There is the passage which details the Hierogrammates having to leave one universe for another through a "side exit" of sorts, as I recall, which implied they did not have control over its conditions enough to prevent their having to flee.

I just don't remember the mechanics of how the sun was restored, and the ramifications of the subsequent flood.

In their terms, they fled to Yesod from their iteration of Bria to escape the Grand Gnab. They subsequently discover they can open wormholes back into the current Bria from Yesod, and energy naturally travels through these, similar to the way matter and energy flow through black holes from Bria to Abaddon, the next lower universe. The White Fountain, then, is an artificial star powered by matter and energy flowing through a wormhole from Yesod to Bria. It is guided to the Sun by homing in on its spiritual link to Severian, and upon arrival it enters the Sun, restoring it to full brightness.

The flood and quakes are a side-effect of the tidal forces of the huge mass and spacewarp passing by, judged necessary by Tzadkiel to disrupt the biological and political leviathans remaining on Urth in order to give humanity a fair second chance on Ushas.

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Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana
< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

Andrew Mason — 02 Dec 2010, 22:43 · follows Jeff Wilson

Lee Berman wrote:

I will disagree that Silk's Outsider possession/vision was the work of the Increate. The fairly clear association of The Outsider with Dionysus in RttW suggests this is a deity operating at a much lower level than the Increate.

That is not clear if Dionysus is seen as a prefiguring of Christ, as he was by C.S. Lewis (as someone commented here recently) - also, by the way, by Wole Soyinka.

António Marques — 02 Dec 2010, 23:04 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:
If you grant that Silk's enlightenments were supernatural and came from the Outsider -- known as the Increate in NS -- then Silkhorn professed an encounter with the Outsider when he prayed and sacrificed (bread and wine) at an old Neighbor altar on a hill near Blanko. See chapter 19 of IGJ,

particularly pages 284-85. Nothing tangible happened, but the context makes it quite clear to me -- an unbeliever -- that this incident is evocative of the Christian God and was intended to be perceived as such.

I'm disturbed by the narrator's crude mention, not far away from there, that he had thought of sacrificing Oreb (if no other sacrifice were available?) on a near occasion.

Lee Berman — 02 Dec 2010, 23:15 · follows António Marques

Son o'Witz- I think it's perfectly clear that the Outsider is Christ or logos. He's presented as the REAL diety outside of the false Pantheon.

I could be. But I just can't be sure. I have doubts. A similar discussion cropped up recently and I think it was Andrew Mason who pointed to a Christ-figure from a story in Long Sun. He was only a little bit perturbed that in the story, the Christ-figure was a man who was possessed by The Outsider while he was doing his thing in the Temple.

I was rather more perturbed. Such possession doesn't sound like the modern Christian God to me and this doesn't seem like a casual mistake Wolfe would make.

I think it is possible that Wolfe did not mean for Briah to be a Christian universe. Briah seems to be a place where there is not just one true God and human constructed false ones. It seems to be a place where superhuman beings abound who sometimes take on the trappings of gods and under the right conditions, are worshiped as such.

I'll again mention the final denouement of BotNS which takes place in the future of the Long and Short Sun stories. After all Severian's efforts and after so many people killed, I would at least hope for Ushas to show signs of being a Christian planet. Instead we have a rather gnostic group of four opposite gods, dark and light, male and female. And a demon swimming around in the ocean.

Maybe Severian, as Sleeper, will somehow change this to monotheism and get them to believe in a Savior. But there isn't any hint of it in the text, though there easily could have been. I think it is possible Briah will have to Gnab and Bang into a new universe before they get a true Jesus.

James Wynn — 02 Dec 2010, 23:30 · in reply to Lee Berman

Son o'Witz- I think it's perfectly clear that the Outsider is Christ or logos. He's presented as the REAL diety outside of the false Pantheon.

Lee-

I could be. But I just can't be sure. I have doubts. A similar discussion cropped up recently and I think it was Andrew Mason who pointed to a Christ-figure from a story in Long Sun. He was only a little bit perturbed that in the story, the Christ-figure was a man who was possessed by The Outsider while he was doing his thing in the Temple. I was rather more perturbed. Such possession doesn't sound like the modern Christian God to me and this doesn't seem like a casual mistake Wolfe would make.

It is from the first chapter of Nightside:

[referring to the merchants] "He would have to be firm with them, extremely firm. Remind them that the Outsider was known to esteem them last among men already--that according to the Writings he had once (having possessed and enlightened a fortunate man) beaten them severely in person."

This is of course the story of Jesus casting out the money-changers. The man in question was not just possessed, he was possessed and enlightened. This is about as close as someone with Silk's religious training would get to describing homoousios.

I wouldn't over-think it.

u+16b9

Jerry Friedman — 02 Dec 2010, 23:48 · in reply to James Wynn

From: James Wynn crushtv@gmail.com

Son o'Witz- I think it's perfectly clear that the Outsider is Christ or logos. He's presented as the REAL diety outside of the false Pantheon.

I think so too.

Lee-

I could be. But I just can't be sure. I have doubts. A similar discussion cropped up recently and I think it was Andrew Mason who pointed to a Christ-figure from a story in Long Sun. He was only a little bit perturbed that in the story, the Christ-figure was a man who was possessed by The Outsider while he was doing his thing in the Temple. I was rather more perturbed. Such possession doesn't sound like the modern Christian God to me and this doesn't seem like a casual mistake Wolfe would make.

James Wynn-

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Someone with Silk's training referring to a story possibly altered by the Chrasnologists that took place in a universe where the Second Person may never have been incarnated (probably wasn't, I think) and where stories echo those of our universe but aren't necessarily the same.

I wouldn't over-think it.

Can a mailing list have a motto?

Actually, thinking about these things is fun, as Lee reminds us, but I'm also in favor of remembering the distinction between "resembles" and "is".

Jerry Friedman

Jeff Wilson — 03 Dec 2010, 01:02 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman quoth:

I think it is possible that Wolfe did not mean for Briahe to be a Christian universe.

Briahe seems to be a place where there is not just one true God and human

constructed
false ones. It seems to be a place where superhuman beings abound who
sometimes take
on the trappings of gods and under the right conditions, are worshiped as
such.

This is no different from Wolfe's stated view of the real world, which he considers Christian.

I'll again mention the final denouement of BotNS which takes place in the
future of
the Long and Short Sun stories. After all Severian's efforts and after so
many people
killed, I would at least hope for Ushas to show signs of being a Christian
planet.
Instead we have a rather gnostic group of four opposite gods, dark and
light, male
and female. And a demon swimming around in the ocean.

Again, this is in keeping with Wolfe's view of how human belief has developed from animistic
beginnings through increasingly involved myth and legend before being ready into Christianity.
Keeping the author's stated beliefs in mind, these are the least speculative aspects of the
BOTNS.

James Wynn — 03 Dec 2010, 03:08 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

I wouldn't over-think it.

Can a mailing list have a motto?

heh heh

Actually, thinking about these things is fun, as Lee reminds us, but
I'm also in favor of remembering the distinction between "resembles"
and "is".

Eh...I suppose. I just think that this quote is like the picture of the astronaut on the moon or the
statue of Blind Justice. The reader is supposed to recognize it and take pleasure in the
recognition. Once again, people find certain readings viscerally appealing aside from what is
detectable from the text. Personally, I don't get any added enjoyment from the books by
thinking of it them in another universe. And if I did, I don't get any enjoyment in thinking that
Silk's vision of Jesus on the cross or the references to the Gospel are some sort of analog. If his
must be a different future than my own, I'd prefer to believe that in Silk's Briah, the Gospels are
mythology (delivering a true message from another universe) and the Outsider showed Silk the
crucifixion from another universe iteration. In short, I enjoyed recognizing the actual astronauts
in front of an actual American flag in tBotNS.

u+16b9

Son of Witz — 03 Dec 2010, 04:08 · in reply to Lee Berman

On Dec 2, 2010, at 3:15 PM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:
I'll again mention the final denouement of BotNS which takes place in the future of
the Long and Short Sun stories. After all Severian's efforts and after so many people
killed, I would at least hope for Ushas to show signs of being a Christian planet.
Instead we have a rather gnostic group of four opposite gods, dark and light, male
and female. And a demon swimming around in the ocean.

When Severian learns about the nascent cosmology of Ushas from the man who feeds E
Sleeper, he tries to enlighten them a bit.

"There is no God but the Increate, all the rest being his creatures." I was tempted to add, "Even Tzadkiel," but I did not. "Yes," he said. And he turned his face away, not wishing, I think, to see my look if he offended me. "That is so for the gods, certainly. But for humble creatures like men, there are lesser gods, possibly. To poor, wretched men these lesser gods are very, very exalted. We strive to please them." I smiled to show I was not angry. "

Lee Berman — 03 Dec 2010, 04:21 · follows Son of Witz

Andrew Mason: ...if Dionysus is seen as a prefiguring of Christ...

Yes. The direction my own thoughts have been going lately. But if Briah is our universe, a Christian universe, why do we see a Dionysian figure 30,000 (or whatever it is) years after the birth of Christ? Perhaps we can postulate that Christianity died out on Earth/Urth and has to go through certain stages to regain it. Or, as Wolfe has said in interviews, we can view this as another, cosmically earlier universe than ours, perhaps one which has never had a Savior.

Must I choose? Or can I continue to accept both possibilities simultaneously?
Must I feel compelled to weigh the evidence, pick a "most likely" and commit myself and my eternal faith to that interpretation?

Normally I don't think my own worldview or beliefs are important in here but since in this situation they are paralleled regarding a fictional world, perhaps they are worth mentioning. I think Roy recently described himself as a "non-believer" I wonder if he would own to the extra step of "disbeliever". I wouldn't for myself. I am comfortable running the "God created Man" mental scenario of the universe as well as the "Man created God" scenario; both simultaneously if necessary. I don't think I need to choose one. There is one thing I know for sure and that is if God created me for a purpose, it involves me being an agnostic. There is nothing truer or deeper to my core than that.

António Pedro Marques — 03 Dec 2010, 11:10 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman wrote (03-12-2010 04:21):

(...) I think Roy recently described himself as a "non-believer" I wonder if he would own to the extra step of "disbeliever". I wouldn't for myself. I am comfortable running the "God created Man" mental scenario of the universe as well as the "Man created God" scenario; both simultaneously if necessary.

I think that's not uncommon. In fact I think that's the natural state of man.

I don't think I need to choose one. (...)

And much frustration in a lot of people's lives derives from trying to impose such a choice.

António Pedro Marques — 03 Dec 2010, 17:12 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

DAVID STOCKHOFF wrote (02-12-2010 17:41):

I think I may have read the story just a few months ago. Frank Stockton?

Do you have the title? I can't remember anymore, it was several years ago. I'm not sure the style was Stockton's - who, by the way, I should probably read one of these days, I think I browsed in translation ages back.

--- On *Thu, 12/2/10, Ant?nio Pedro Marques /<antonio at gmail.com>/* wrote:

From: Ant?nio Pedro Marques <antonio at gmail.com>
Subject: Re: (urth) Academic commentary
To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>
Date: Thursday, December 2, 2010, 11:53 AM

(Whose was that old story in which an atheist managed to become Pope?)

David Stockhoff — 03 Dec 2010, 17:44 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

I can't find it---it wasn't Stockton. The one I'm thinking of actually concerns how the Devil became Pope, or made a wizard Pope, simply by being a practicing necromancer and acting in as depraved a manner as possible. The Cardinals were jealous and tried to kill him by black magic, but there were several twists. Damned if I can remember who wrote it!

Probably not the one James is thinking of.

On 12/3/2010 12:12 PM, Ant?nio Pedro Marques wrote:
DAVID STOCKHOFF wrote (02-12-2010 17:41):

I think I may have read the story just a few months ago. Frank Stockton?

Do you have the title? I can't remember anymore, it was several years ago. I'm not sure the style was Stockton's - who, by the way, I should probably read one of these days, I think I browsed in translation ages back.

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(Whose was that old story in which an atheist managed to become Pope?)

Andrew Mason — 03 Dec 2010, 19:44 · follows António Pedro Marques

Lee Berman wrote:

I could be. But I just can't be sure. I have doubts. A similar discussion cropped up recently and I think it was Andrew Mason who pointed to a Christ-figure from a story in Long Sun. He was only a little bit perturbed that in the story, the Christ-figure was a man who was possessed by The Outsider while he was doing his thing in the Temple.

Actually, I was not perturbed at all, because I don't think the error is Wolfe's. As I read it, Silk is remembering a story from the Chiasmologic Writings. The authors of the Writings were not Christians (or Muslims, or Stoics, or members of any of the other movements they used as sources), so they would naturally tell the story in terms they thought their readers would find plausible.

I'll again mention the final denouement of BotNS which takes place in the future of the Long and Short Sun stories. After all Severian's efforts and after so many people killed, I would at least hope for Ushas to show signs of being a Christian planet. Instead we have a rather gnostic group of four opposite gods, dark and light, male and female. And a demon swimming around in the ocean.

Maybe Severian, as Sleeper, will somehow change this to monotheism and get them to believe in a Savior.

Severian says there is a single God, the Increate, and the priest agrees with him in principle, saying that this is true for the gods, but for ordinary people there are other gods who are very great and deserve to be honoured. This seems to link up with the description of the Outsider (in the list of names in *_Exodus_*) as 'the God of gods'.

Wolfe is said to believe that pagan gods exist. This does not stop him being a monotheist in the sense of believing in only one God, in the sense that the traditional monotheistic faiths conceive of God. (And a lot of ancient pagans *_did_* believe in a single creator God, with the other gods being either aspects of him or subordinate beings.) The position that Severian's community have reached at the end of *_Urth_* may not seem inappropriate to him - though I think he does probably expect it to develop further.

Joe Bushong-Taylor — 18 Jan 2011, 06:45 · follows James Wynn

Just a reminder that *Home Fires* is released today. I have been looking forward to this one for quite a while, and I have promised myself to read only a chapter per day. I look forward to reading member comments about *Home Fires*!