

Problems of Interpretation

The Urth list — 9 messages, 5 voices, 01 Dec 2010

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Dec 2010, 18:01

Nice post.

I generally agree with what you say about "the author's stated intentions or explanations of a text," for two reasons. The first is what Tolkien and Lewis called the "Personal Heresy," the idea that the most important tool for interpreting a text is the author's biography; the second is that I have experienced people finding meanings in texts of mine which I never (consciously) put there but which, when pointed out to me, made complete sense.

But that latter is why I refuse the idea that facts about the author are completely irrelevant. The meaning which was pointed out to me had to do with some of my most deeply-held beliefs.

My position, then, is this: the writer's worldview cannot help but inform the way he writes about the world, and the type of meaning s/he consciously _or unconsciously_ uses to structure his/her materials.

This does not mean, for example, that "the meaning" of every Lupine text must be Catholic-Orthodox; in fact, given some of his texts, that would be ludicrous. But it does mean that his deeply held Catholic beliefs (as well as his other deeply-held beliefs, including his conservatism and his engineering orientation) _will_ be involved with his creation of worlds. Just as important, however, is his close control over what his _narrators_ believe about their worlds.

Take TWK as an example: On the one hand, the cosmology of TWK is clearly _not_ Christian. On the other, it seems to be a non-Christian cosmology embedded in a _larger_ Christian cosmology. Does that make it a "Christian book?" I think not; that "larger cosmology" is too attenuated to be even visible to most casual readers. Certainly Able never works that one out.

In this context, I think it is interesting that the only parts of the Solar cycle in which explicitly "supernatural" events take place is the Long Sun, and the third-person sections of RttW. The "miraculous" events in both the New and Short Suns have quasi-scientific/engineering explanations either on display or shortly below the surface. (Indeed, even the most important "miracle" in Long Sun, Silk's enlightenment, is offered a rationalistic explanation by Crane: though I believe that we are to understand that the narrator rejects that explanation.) The reason this is important is because these are precisely the parts of the Solar Cycle narrated by someone who was not present at the events in question. Wolfe may be making a point about the mythopoeic process here.

Some specific comments.

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.

It seems to me that _no_ text can be understood purely on its own terms. All(?) texts (and this is certainly true of Wolfe) depend on allusion to other texts to help produce their overall richness.

Wolfe makes the problem of the intentional fallacy particularly...problematic.

Indeed: but then, I have always regarded it as problematic. Intentionality isn't a binary function, it's a cloudy range, from pure allegory (such as _Pilgrim's Progress_), where to ignore the author's intentions is to misread; to quasi-allegorical works (like Narnia and "Leaf by Niggle"), where the author's intention controls the reading pretty closely; to stories (like _To Kill a Mockingbird_) where the author's intention is clear but other meanings are plausible; all the way to the sort of work (mostly "pure entertainment" like pulp fiction) where the author deliberately disclaims any intentions and attempts to act as a transparent reporter.

Where on this scale does Wolfe fall? (Which Lupine text?)

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

Indeed, in interpreting Wolfe it is often difficult to tell what is a "puzzle" and what is "interpretation." For example: there is intriguing (if not necessarily compelling) textual evidence, e.g., for the "Horn died in the pit/the Neighbors are the trees" set of theories. _If_ Wolfe deliberately planted this evidence and expects the clever reader to find it and understand that Horn did die in the pit and that the Neighbors are the trees, _then_ it's a puzzle. _But_ the answer to that puzzle radically changes the legitimate space for interpreting the text!

(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.)

Agreed so far as you go. But I think that a useful/interesting reading needs to take the author's worldview into account, even if it ultimately shows that the author has "betrayed" his/her intentions and written something inconsistent with them. In fact, if I understand correctly, the claim that it is (almost) always possible to show that (almost) any author has done so is the key (one might say the hinge) of the Deconstructionist movement in criticism. Then -- again, not having read Wright, this is pure speculation -- if Wright is saying, "Wolfe may believe X, but his text says ~X," I'm good with that; but if Wright is simply _ignoring_ Wolfe's worldview, I think he's off the rails.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

James Wynn — 01 Dec 2010, 19:48 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Jane Delawney-

Sorry I appear to have missed the original reference (I get overwhelmed with internet stuff quite often, blame my age) but regarding Ash and Vine, I have always assumed that these are cognates / references to Ask and Embla (Ash and Vine, in translation) the first human couple of post-Fimbulwinter, post-Ragnarok Midgard in Norse tradition.

Dan'l-

Indeed, in interpreting Wolfe it is often difficult to tell what is a "puzzle" and what is "interpretation." For example: there is intriguing (if not necessarily compelling) textual evidence, e.g., for the "Horn died in the pit/the Neighbors are the trees" set of theories. _If_ Wolfe deliberately planted this evidence and expects the clever reader to find it and understand that Horn did die in the pit and that the Neighbors are the trees, _then_ it's a puzzle. _But_ the answer to that puzzle radically changes the legitimate space for interpreting the text!

I think this quote by Dan'l is very insightful and well-put. The solution to certain puzzles affect the way the text is read. And the way one is inclined to read the text affects what solutions are tenable. Someone once asked an atheist friend of mine why he didn't believe in God. He responded: "I don't see any evidence of it". My thought at the time was that I saw evidence to the contrary everywhere.

But on to my main point:

These references first by Jane (regarding Ask and Embla) and now again by Dan'l have got me thinking again about the Neighbor-Trees theory. Dan'l only mentioned half the issue (maybe less than half). There are intriguing associations between the Neighbors and the Trees. But even more so, there is evidence of an equivalency between the inhumi and the vines. At one point, someone claimed the Rajan's staff--made from a vine-- was an inhumi, that it had a face, that the Rajan talked to it at night.

Furthermore, the trees and vines are referenced as husband and wife: "Have I made you see Green's jungles? The swamps and their dire inhabitants? The immense trees and the lianas clinging to them like brides? [iGJ]

A few pages later he compares Jahlee-in-tream-travel to a vine in the same terms: "I went over to watch Rigoglio, and in a moment more found Jahlee clinging to me like the lianas, her body warm and damp with perspiration (as those of inhumi never are), and fragrant with some heavy, cloying scent."

The references are there, but I haven't been able to figure out how it could be (not uncommon for me). How the trees could be Neighbors I can get. But the inhumi as vines?

So, anyway, this post is intended as a "proof of concept". An attempt to show that it is at least possible.

Suppose the Neighbors that Horn encounters in the woods are in dream-travel. That's not hard. But suppose their physical beings are not much like their soul traveling bodies. Suppose they are trees. Suppose that soul-traveling is their almost constant active state.

"The trees are bigger up the river. Bigger and older, and not so sleepy." [oBW]

Suppose the trees and vines originated on Green. And suppose they achieved their soul travel ability through some power inherent in the vines, or alternately the vines have inherited something by clinging to the Neighbors. But the vines are not sentient beings. Yet, through their physical connection with the Neighbors, when the Neighbors soul traveled, the clinging vines came along for the ride to become the inhumi--non-sentient animals.

The Neighbors--as active in soul travel as humans but as free to travel as the Rajan-- created their cities, fought their wars, and transported seeds and vines to Blue. I personally presume that the Neighbors did not have the ability for space travel until the Whorl arrived. So the inhumis were used for that purpose.

An inhumis who is born on Green, must simultaneously be born physically as a vine. And an inhumis that is born sentient is connected spiritually/psychically to its vine. So when the Rajan made a staff from a vine, the inhumis --not killed by the destruction of its body-- communicates with the Rajan through its vine-now-staff.

Not only does this explain the Tree/Vines references (and add irony to soup the colonists eat made from vines) but it explains something that has always seemed more Fantasy than Science Fiction: the inhumis's power to absorb the souls of those on whom they fed and impart that soul to their children. The inhumis can do this because they are essentially SPIRITUAL/psychic beings.

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Roy C. Lackey — 02 Dec 2010, 02:15 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn wrote:

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"The trees are bigger up the river. Bigger and older, and not so sleepy." [oBW]

Suppose the trees and vines originated on Green.

The books state that the Neighbors were native to Blue (lists, OBW, IGJ), so if they are trees they did not originate on Green.

And suppose they achieved their soul travel ability through some power inherent in the vines, or alternately the vines have inherited something by clinging to the Neighbors. But the vines are not sentient beings. Yet, through their physical connection with the Neighbors, when the Neighbors soul traveled, the clinging vines came along for the ride to become the inhumis--non-sentient animals.

The Neighbors--as active in soul travel as humans but as free to travel as the Rajan-- created their cities, fought their wars, and transported seeds and vines to Blue.

The migration of the Neighbors was the other way around. They were native to Blue and only later went to Green. That is why there are few ruins to be seen on Blue, but the ruins on Green still stand.

That is what Silkhorn told Hide in that chopped-up conversation about the Vanished People they had while camped at the edge of that swamp after leaving Blanko. See particularly pages 352-53 of IGJ.

I personally presume that the Neighbors did not have the ability for space travel until the Whorl arrived. So the inhum were used for that purpose.

Silkhorn believed that the Neighbors had spaceships (ibid., 353). Inhum were introduced into the _Whorl_ by the Neighbors, presumably when they first boarded the ship as it neared the Short Sun system (RTTW, 232). If the rules for spirit travel are the same for Neighbors as they are for humans, the spirit bodies of any inhum they bring along will lose their fangs and other inhum characteristics, as was the case for Fava, Jahlee and Juganu. Quetzal had fangs and was every bit an inhum, therefore he did not get there by spirit travel.

-Roy

James Wynn — 02 Dec 2010, 03:45 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

James Wynn wrote:

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Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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List oBW:

"Blue's sentient race."

List iGJ:

"The name by which the sentient native race is known on Blue's western continent, the Vanished People."

Hmmm...I'm a member of America's sentient race but my race did not originate there. American is the name by which the native race is known in the Northwestern continent. Others are known as Canadian. But that says nothing about their origins. Still, I would have rather hoped that Wolfe would leave more breadcrumbs if the Neighbors had originated on Green. But then, he doesn't always (or often) leave as many breadcrumbs as I think he ought. I'd say mark this as inconclusive with the weight toward NOT FROM GREEN. Still, on the whole its fifty-fifty.

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Okay, this conversation hurts. I'm inclined to trust the Rajan on the general history of the Neighbors. I could say that the Neighbors transported their seeds to Green and that was where they encountered the inhum lianas except that the Rajan says, or strongly implies, that the inhum were preying on the "great beasts" of Green before the Neighbors arrived.

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I agree they did not transport the inhum to the Whorl by spirit travel. I'm not saying that. How they got them to the Whorl has always been a mystery. I'm sure no one would allow an alien

lander to dock. It is possible the inhumis flew there. The Rajan believes the Neighbors "must have" had landers. He doesn't say why he is so certain, but, again, I'm inclined to trust him. Maybe because they were trees? I don't know. Still, if the Neighbors had landers, where are they?

The Rajan says the Neighbors went to Green from Blue and that is where they became "wise", presumably where they became "Neighbors". My construct is still technically possible but verrrry cumbersome. Alas, I'm still not sure how the inhumis could be vines.

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Lee Berman — 02 Dec 2010, 04:28 · follows James Wynn

I've been following the discussion with some interest. It really seems like Horn died in the pit. Aside from the other evidence mentioned, the chapter is called The End and Horn explicitly calls it his grave. Maybe I was conditioned by Severian's eidolon resurrection but I can remember thinking even on first reading that, "okay, this guy really just died". So something inexplicably brought him back to life. I don't know the answer but I thought it must have something to do with Krait since that's who Horn sees him as he regains consciousness. I am interested in hearing more about James' theory regarding greenbuck and the Neighbors. It would help explain that other mystery- why Horn is so instantly recognized and accepted by the Neighbors.

Roy C. Lackey- Silkhorn believed that the Neighbors had spaceships

I think maybe this is also supported by the pit? It is large and circular and the vegetation in it is all new growth. Moreover there is a ring of blue glass encircling the pit. Fused sand from the heat of take-off rocket exhaust?

Seawrack notes a similarity of the constructions in the pit to those she has seen underwater. Evidence of a Flood?

Roy C. Lackey — 02 Dec 2010, 06:34 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn wrote:.

Still, I would have rather hoped that Wolfe would leave more breadcrumbs if the Neighbors had originated on Green. But then, he doesn't always (or often) leave as many breadcrumbs as I think he ought. I'd say mark this as inconclusive with the weight toward NOT FROM GREEN. Still, on the whole its fifty-fifty.

Not even. Later in that same conversation with Hide, Silkhorn all but spells it out (IGJ, 355). The Neighbors were native to Blue. Further, on the same page Hide asked: "What happened when all the Vanished People here were dead?" Silkhorn answered: "I'm not sure it ever occurred." "A very few may have survived; a very few may survive here still." There are more than a few trees on Blue, including the big, old ones up the river on Shadelow you alluded to.

I'll go one step further and give the quote that *should* put an end to this issue. It is from one of the Neighbors who gave Blue to humans: "From this whorl we sprang." (OBW, 271)

[snip]

I agree they did not transport the inhumis to the Whorl by spirit travel. I'm not saying that. How they got them to the Whorl has always been a mystery. I'm sure no one would allow an alien lander to dock. It is

possible the inhumis flew there.

FWIW, Jahlee said that was too far for the inhumis to fly.

The Rajan believes the Neighbors "must have" had landers. He doesn't say why he is so certain, but, again, I'm inclined to trust him. Maybe because they were trees? I don't know. Still, if the Neighbors had landers, where are they?

I don't care to argue the point, but Jahlee's "slender tower" (RTTW, 59) on that cliff on Green has elements suggestive of the remnants of a spaceship.

-Roy

James Wynn — 02 Dec 2010, 07:05 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey -

Later in that same conversation with Hide, Silkhorn all but spells it out (IGJ, 355). The Neighbors were native to Blue. Further, on the same page Hide asked: "What happened when all the Vanished People here were dead?" Silkhorn answered: "I'm not sure it ever occurred." "A very few may have survived; a very few may survive here still." There are more than a few trees on Blue, including the big, old ones up the river on Shadelow you alluded to.

As I said, I believe the Rajan when he says that the Neighbors came from Blue. Point made. But the fact that there are lots of trees means nothing...zero. I'm not sure why you think it does. The Neighbors who were wiped out would not have been destroyed in their tree form. Their corporal forms would have continued to live on. That's what happens when you die in soul travel. Your body lives on and your soul dies. The dead Neighbors would have become nothing but regular ol' trees, right?

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James Wynn — 02 Dec 2010, 20:47 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman-

I've been following the discussion with some interest. It really seems like Horn died in the pit. Aside from the other evidence mentioned, the chapter is called The End and Horn explicitly calls it his grave. Maybe I was conditioned by Severian's eidolon resurrection but I can remember thinking even on first reading that, "okay, this guy really just died". So something inexplicably brought him back to life. I don't know the answer but I thought it must have something to do with Krait since that's who Horn sees him as he regains consciousness. I am interested in hearing more about James' theory regarding greenbuck and the Neighbors. It would help explain that other mystery- why Horn is so instantly recognized and accepted by the Neighbors.

Once again, for Lee....

Horn on the ruinous island sees a Neighbor in the form of a greenbuck. He chases after it, falls in a pit, breaks his neck and dies. The reason I say he breaks his neck (aside from being a likely way to die instantaneously in that circumstance) is that Babbie and Seawrack see him in that pit and know he is dead without having to go down there. The Neighbor feels guilt at having caused Horn's death (in a sense). This is the guilt that haunts our Narrator throughout the story, and this guilt is the reason that he is adamant on being Horn instead of Silk....if he declares himself Silk or neither Horn nor Silk, it would mean that he had killed Horn and that there was

no way to truly repair it. At the end of the story, he is reported to say:

RTTW (HB) pg 411

"We will sail tonight...Would you be willing to make my farewells to Hoof and Hide?...I've been dreading it--in a sense, I have killed their father, though the Outsider surely knows that I never meant him the least harm. I don't want to have to face his sons..."

The Neighbor's perspective on taking a life was detailed in the conversation between the Rajan and Hide when they are talking about Hide's dream of seeing Mora and (I believe) dark Fava. I suspect there are hints about several things in that conversation, but the part I quote below explains how the greenbuck Neighbor sees guilt over causing the death of another being.

RTTW (HB) pg 24

"I spoke of killing a man with this. I hadn't intended to kill him, but I was afraid he was going to kill us. I thought he might kill you or Jahlee, and kept hitting him as hard as I could; when the fighting had ended, I looked at him, and he was dead." "It wasn't your fault, Father." "Of course it was, and his as well. It was---it is---my fault that I killed him. It is his fault that I bear the guilt of killing him, because he gave me good reason to fear him."

The Neighbor revives Horn by possessing and repairing the damage (or seeming to at least). It takes three days to do that.

There's a lot in this thematically. 1) Christ was dead three days in the grave and was resurrected.

2) Secondly, 'The Book of the Long Sun' is mapped over the life of Aristaeus as related by Robert Graves. Aristaeus's son Aktaion saw Artemis naked (Seawrack), and was changed into a deer, and torn apart by his own hounds (Not Horn is killed by his own mutinous men).

3) Thirdly, "Neighbors" is a term for fairies as noted by a character in An Evil Guest. One is likely to encounter a white stag on the border of Fairieland (which is the land of the dead) at which point --ala the Mabinogion-- find a Aelf King/changeling has taken your identity. Alternately, one enters Fairieland through a fairie circle, in this case, Horn's circular grave.

Now the "new Horn" is Horn's body and memory with the Neighbor *as his soul*. The Neighbor, who we'll call HORN seeks to absolve his guilt by completing Horn's mission. He-Pen-Sheep and She-Pick-Berry seem to have a lot of discourse with the Neighbors call him "Neighbor-man"

OBW (HB) pg 261&262

Later HORN meets with Neighbors who give him a ring and the deed to Blue as a representative of his people. As he walks through the woods, the trees get out of his way. They choose him because he is a mixture of Neighbor and human. A Mediator--a orthodox and gnostic Christian designation for Christ. One of the Neighbors shakes Horn's hand and they "share blood".

oBW (HB) pg 272

"My name is Horn." I offered him my hand. He took it, and this time I felt his hand and remembered hard, and seemed to be covered with short, stiff hairs. Beyond that I will not say. "My name is Horn also, " he told me. I felt that I was being paid an immense compliment, and did not know how to reply.

There's a obvious kind of mystery going on here. When he shares blood with this Neighbor who

afterward calls himself "Horn", the Narrator has access to some of his former psyche or that of the Neighbor. But it is clear that "Horn" has ceased to be merely that boy who arrived from the Whorl. The Narrator says a few pages earlier that he does not remember this event merely in fairly accurate terms, but precisely as it occurred. This is because he remembers it simultaneously from two separate points of view: himself and the Neighbor with whom he clasped hands. This suggests that the Neighbors might have a loosely communal consciousness or a communal personality like the Shadow Children or the children who were turned into a flock of geese in "Peace". Or maybe the Neighbor is HORN's spiritual self. Later on Green, as the Narrator lays dying he uses his ring to summon help to heal him again.

IGJ (HB) pg127

"Through the ring a Neighbor saw him, and she came to him in his agony. He told her what was in his heart; and when he had finished, she said, "I cannot make you well again, and if I could you would still be in this place. I can do this for you, however, if you desire it. I can send your spirit into someone else, into someone whose own spirit is dying. If you wish, I will find someone in the whorl in which you were born. Then there will be one whole man there, instead of two dying men, one here and another there."

***** /

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From what she says, HORN's agony is not just in that he is dying but//in that he is going to fail his mission. The Neighbor's solution solves both those problems: giving him a workable body and putting him on the Whorl. She complicates matters in some ways by choosing the object of Horn's mission. Silk has slashed his wrists and arms in front of Hyacinth's casket. She sends HORN into Silk. Now he is the Neighbor, what the Neighbor remembers of Horn's memories, and Silk's body and memories. I call him the Rajan, because that is what Wolfe calls him.

iGJ (HB) pg 122

"Was this you for real Incanto? Were you on Green? By Echidna's babies, I think you were!" I shook my head and told him it had been someone else, a man whose name I have forgotten, a man who wore a ring with a white stone. My own name is Horn, no matter what Oreb may say.

You see, there is Horn and there is HORN and there is the Rajan...the man who begins writing the Book of the Short Sun, Incanto, Pike's Ghost. At the end of the story, he ultimately realizes that he is neither most truly Horn nor Silk, but the soul inside or, perhaps, something entirely different from all three.

And if there were any other doubt, there is "Silk's" inhuman but very Neighborly new abilities such as dream-traveling and "sharing blood"

iGJ (HB) pg 267

" 'We're going to attack you within an hour, Incanto. You'll be--' He

fell silent, staring at me. 'Can you hear something I don't?'

'Sing song,' Oreb suggested; and I did, following Seawrack's own

intonation and pronunciation to the best of my very limited ability. [snip] 'That is the language of the Neighbors, whom you call the Vanished People,' I said when I could no longer sing for weeping. 'I can--' Terzo began. Then again, 'I can almost hear it myself.' He fell silent.

I put my hand upon his shoulder . 'Listen, and you will hear her.

Those who truly listen do.'

He heard the music then, I know..

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Andrew Mason — 02 Dec 2010, 22:40 · follows James Wynn

Lee Berman wrote:

But the part about minor gods being invited friends of Pas/Typhon is most interesting. Easy to see how this could apply to Kypris. But who is the invited friend of Typhon from Urth who becomes mentioned in the Writings as The Outsider?

I'm thinking it needs to be an Urthly resident who, like the Outsider, is associated with Dionysus.

Is it clear that Horn still sees the Outsider as a minor god? Silk stopped seeing him as one; Horn, as a devotee of Silk, is likely to have done the same.

Somewhere in _Long Sun_ someone, I think Marble, says that the Outsider was worshipped on the Short Sun Whorl - that does not seem to fit a friend of Typhon (but does fit the Increate).