

convo from a decade ago

The Urth list — 7 messages, 6 voices, 05 May 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6248>

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Daniel Petersen — 05 May 2012, 09:20

Just in case you've joined this list less than five years ago, like me, I want to share what I thought was a pretty incredible piece of analysis from ol' Dan'I just over a decade ago (he is working off of comments made by Michael Straight) - mainly about Long and Short Sun. It's a very LONG paste as it includes acute responses from Steve Strickland, then Michael Straight, then James Jordan.

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The thread goes on with many more insightful responses that flesh it out and nuance it very well, but this is where I stopped copying...

-DOJP

From: "Dan'I Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>

Subject: (whorl) Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible Copyists: a Textual Date: Sun, 10 Jun 2001 15:39:30

This will wander a little off the Lupine track, but trust me, it's heading straight back there. Some points of Rostrum's screed got my head working, and I've got a basic thesis on what Wolfe is doing and why.

The first of Rostrum's remarks that I responded to was this:

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did get out of it was a weird sense that Wolfe had patterned this whole thing somehow after model the Catholic church uses to describe the formation of the (written) Gospels.

Briefly, for non-[Catholic-Bible-scholars]: The basic idea the Catholic church endorses is that the Gospels were formed in three "layers":

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2. The memories of those events carried by eyewitnesses

and the communities founded by those eyewitnesses.

3. The setting-down of those memories by the communities, probably late in the first century.

The Catholic answers to questions like "Yeah, but how do we know it's true?" and "Well, what about the way they [seem to] conflict with each other?" are deeply entrenched in that model, but it gets pretty complicated at that point.

Now, what I think we have in Horn's "Book of Silk" is something similar: Horn was, admittedly, an eyewitness to some of these events -- a fairly small proportion of them. He's gone around interviewing people, filled in the details as best he can, and freely admits he made the rest up to complete the narrative. It isn't good historiography, but it suffices; it gives the sense of someone who isn't a historian doing the best he can. The made- up stuff, while perhaps not accurate, isn't a lie, in the sense of an untruth meant to deceive; it is intended to convey a sense of the probable truth.

So we have all three stages compressed into one text:

1. We have Horn's own authentic(?) memories of Silk.
2. We have the community's memories of Silk.
3. The "Book of Silk" as written by Horn & Nettle collecting and collating their own memories with those of the community.

Unfortunately, there's an implicit Stage 4, which is also implicit in the Catholic model: The copyists get hold of the text, and a long time later, scholars try to trace the provenance of textual variants backwards and determine the "true" original text of Stage 3.

In the case of the BOOK OF THE LONG SUN, we feel like we have the product of Stage 3, but the Narrator's comments in SHORT SUN lead us to wonder whether we might actually have a corrupt copy, and how corrupt? Nor do Horn's comments at the end of LONG SUN make it any easier to determine; compare them to the first four verses of the Gospel according to Luke, and then find out how much work goes into preparing a good textual "edition" of that Gospel. Assurances by the author of the text's accuracy do not greatly help when the text has been hand-copied many times.

Which leads me to another of Rostrum's points:

It's not that Wolfe leaves things ambiguous because he doesn't care whether you believe in Silk's enlightenment. Rather he's giving you the same kind of evidence that we have in the real world--do you trust the people who claim to have had an encounter with God and (equally important) the community of people who have told and retold their stories? Can we hope that, though mediated through our own fallibility and the fallibility of others, we can still have some genuine knowledge of God?

We have, in THE BOOK OF THE LONG SUN, one of the following:

- a) Horn and Nettle's "Book of Silk"
- b) one of many possible variant texts
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-- and nothing to help us which. We are, in fact, in the precise position of a non-scholarly reader

of the Bible, or perhaps (given that this discussion is happening at all) a medieval scholar with no access to modern textual studies.

So: paraphrasing Rostrum, can we hope that, though mediated through our own fallibility and the fallibility of others, we can still have some genuine knowledge of Silk?

I think the answer is, and has to be, "Yes," because the possibility that it's all made-up (within the Lupine universe of discourse) is too drab to be worth discussing.

All this brings me to my basic thesis.

What Wolfe has reproduced, here, is the basic problem of putting faith in a written Scripture. The following paragraph refers equivocally to the Bible (for us, or at least those of us to whom the Bible represents something more than a reactionary symbol of patriarchal oppression) and to The Book of Silk (for a representative inhabitant of the Lupiverse, modulo similar concerns).

"What can we believe about this text or its contents? By itself, it is completely incapable of witnessing to its own veracity, and we are not even capable of coming to certainty on what the text actually does say in some places; yet many have believed and do believe that it is a true account of the most important thing that ever happened in this world. To believe that it is completely made up by its author or authors seems impossible; to believe that it is accurate, on a word-by-word, factual basis, seems even more impossible (though there are some extremists who in fact believe each of those things)."

Now, when Rostrum writes, "Perhaps Wolfe is being a gentleman; he doesn't insist that you accept the existence of God in order to enjoy his story," I disagree rather vehemently; to deny Silk's enlightenment is to make the whole LONG SUN (and, by transference, SHORT) fall apart, meaningless and incoherent. He even sets that possibility up as a straw man (Crane's cerebral accident theory), and _doesn't_ provide us with arguments about it, because it is ridiculous _prima facie_. There is, I think, no way to take the supernatural element out of the SUN books in any kind of "good faith" (in the existential sense).

Still, I agree that "[t]here is a sense in which telling a story from a third-person, omniscient viewpoint is cheating."

There is. And there is another sense in which all stories are told from that viewpoint, even those told by a limited and unreliable first-person narrator. The reader (well, all but the most childlike and passive reader) sits outside the universe of discourse and, if not omniscient, is at least outside the viewpoint of the narrator, judging it. Without that basic fact, the concept of an unreliable narrator would be entirely meaningless.

Again: "We never know the world that way."

No, we don't. But somehow we _conceive_ the world that way. We have a sense that there is a single, coherent reality, even if our own limited knowledge can never get at it. Living in a universe run by quantum mechanics doesn't really change that; it defines the limits of how much we can know about it. (If there is an omniscient and omnipotent Creator, Heisenberg's Law is a clear and present "No Trespassing" sign.)

Enough.

--Blattid/Dan'I

From: "Steve Strickland" <SSTRICKLAND at satx.rr.com>

Subject: Re: (whorl) Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible Copyists: a Textual Consideration of the "Book of Silk" Date: Sun, 10 Jun 2001 20:35:11

A nice piece of work, Dan'I, but I think Rostrum's remarks hit the mark closest, especially when he said:

"Perhaps Wolfe is being a gentleman; he doesn't insist that you accept the existence of God in order to enjoy his story."

In short, I think it is deliberate religious ambiguity Wolfe is attempting to generate, in much the same way that he generated ambiguity in "The Book of the New Sun."

Somewhere, maybe it is in one of the "Castle of Days" articles or in an interview I read somewhere, Mr. Wolfe wrote about the relationship between his faith and his writing, particularly with respect to the Book of the New Sun. (Conveniently) I don't remember exactly what he said, but my impression from the piece was that he was deliberately ambiguous on the question of religion, that TBOTNS was not a religious work, but a secular work, and that, thus, Mr. Wolfe was careful to preserve a certain ambiguity in that regard.

Where is the religious ambiguity in TBOTNS? Well, for instance, I think, almost certainly, that Master Ash's bleak and scientific outlook depicted part of that ambiguity. Maybe, too, the notion visited in "Sword of the Lictor" that, if the universe had existed for an infinite time, all things, including angels, would have come into existence by logical necessity. And, from my religious perspective, it's hard to imagine a more terrifying story than Melito's story from the "Citadel of the Autarch" of "The Cock, the Angel, and the Eagle", especially as that story was revisited and affirmed as true in "Urth of the New Sun." The point is that within TBOTNS Mr. Wolfe himself generates an alternative religious interpretation of the world in which his story takes place, something that an atheist would be much more comfortable with than a priest. (Though there's also plenty of room for the priest's interpretation.) To me, this ambiguity is most excellent and makes the work, not only uplifting (as would be a purely religious work), but also subtly frightening.

In Long Sun and Short Sun, I think there's a similar principle and purpose at work (same author, after all). The technique here is to raise a question about the veracity/accuracy of the storyteller. It is thus possible that the story has an entirely naturalistic interpretation, that, for instance, the divine visitations, Silk's goodness, could be written in after the fact. It is again subtly frightening.

Yikes! I just read what I just wrote. It probably doesn't make any sense at all. Sorry.

Imperator

From: Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu>

Subject: Re: (whorl) Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible Copyists: a Date: Mon, 11 Jun 2001 09:10:41

On Sun, 10 Jun 2001, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
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did get out of it was a weird sense that Wolfe had patterned this whole thing somehow after model the Catholic church uses to describe the formation of the (written) Gospels.

I didn't get into that specifically, but, yes, this is exactly what I had in mind too.

One of my favorite parallels: Luke and Acts are thought to have been written by the same person (arguably, "Luke"). Luke is all third person, and Acts is almost entirely third person until about 2/3 of the way through (in the fourth part if you divided the two books into four parts) the narrator suddenly says, "and then we got ready to leave for Macedonia" (Acts 16:10).

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I strongly disagree. Horn believes that Silk was enlightened, and perhaps Silk believed it. But I don't think Silk's story is completely incoherent or unexplainable without it. It's certainly possible Silk simply had some sort of moment of inspiration in which he decided he ought to try to save the manteion (or decided that the Outsider wanted him to save the manteion). People point to Silk having received otherwise unavailable knowledge from his enlightenment, but its nothing Horn would not have known at the time he wrote the story. It's not like Horn even uses this as "proof" that Silk was enlightened, so it wouldn't necessarily have been bad faith if he just added those parts because he believed Silk must have had some sort of revelation.

Did Jesus really predict the fall of Jerusalem, or is that something the gospel writers added in later?

Now I agree that the most satisfying reading of Silk's story involves trusting Horn and his descendents and accepting Silk's enlightenment, but I still say that Wolfe (1) doesn't cheat by saying "yes, it's true, I know because I'm omniscient" (interviews excluded) and (2) still gives you a good, if more tragic story should you choose to think Silk and Horn were mistaken.

But then I'm the guy who thinks "Westwind" may be a sinister story.

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There is. And there is another sense in which all stories are told from that viewpoint, even those told by a limited and unreliable first-person narrator. The reader (well, all but the most childlike and passive reader) sits outside the universe of discourse and, if not omniscient, is at least outside the viewpoint of the narrator, judging it. Without that basic fact, the concept of an unreliable narrator would be entirely meaningless.

Sure that happens, but I'm not sure that means it's a good idea. I'm not sure, but I have the suspicion that allowing ourselves to really believe in that feeling of having an outside, objective viewpoint is the source of many evils. "Unreliable narrator" may in fact be a meaningless, or at least tautologous concept. Or rather, it's the idea of a completely reliable narrator that is a fallacy.

Again: "We never know the world that way."

No, we don't. But somehow we _conceive_ the world that way. We have a sense that there is a single, coherent reality, even if our own

limited knowledge can never get at it.

This is a good point. We're always telling ourselves 3rd-person omniscient stories about the world. Is that a mistake? I don't know.

-Rostrum

From: James Jordan <jbjordan4 at home.com>

Subject: Re: (whorl) Fallible Narrators

Date: Mon, 11 Jun 2001 09:14:14

At 03:40 PM 6/10/2001 -0400, Rostrum wrote:

I think part of what Wolfe is doing is this: If there are those who doubt someone so good as Silk could exist, or that he could really be enlightened by the Outsider, or that any god like the Outsider could really exist, then they are free to think that Horn embellished or was mistaken. Perhaps Wolfe is being a gentleman; he doesn't insist that you accept the existence of God in order to enjoy his story.

There is a sense in which telling a story from a third-person, omniscient viewpoint is cheating.

Perhaps a slightly different take, which may be part of Wolfe's motivation. Silk is Christlike, but he's not Christ. TBLS is like the gospels, but it's not the gospels. Wolfe is a conservative Christian, so he believes the gospels as originally written were "inspired and infallible" and that they have been preserved accurately in the Church. TBLS does not have these divine attributes. Thus:

Gospels : TBLS :: Jesus : Silk

With TBSS we move one step farther away from infallibility. TBSS is not a second-order version of part of the Bible, but is the life of a saint. But again, from a Roman Catholic standpoint, there is always the question of what REALLY happened in the life of a saint. (Remember the controversy a few years ago when the Vatican began to question whether St. Nicholas ever really lived.) Thus, in the order of perfection and infallibility:

Gospels : TBLS : TBSS :: Jesus : Silk : Horn/Narrator(s)

Maybe such considerations played no part in Wolfe's thinking, but they make a kind of sense, given what he has done in these two books.

Nutria

From: James Jordan <jbjordan4 at home.com>

Subject: Re: (whorl) Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible Date: Mon, 11 Jun 2001 09:21:16

At 08:35 PM 6/10/2001 -0500, you wrote:

Where is the religious ambiguity in TBOTNS? Well, for instance, I think, almost certainly, that Master Ash's bleak and scientific outlook depicted part of that ambiguity. Maybe, too, the notion visited in "Sword of the Lictor" that, if the universe had existed for an infinite time, all things, including angels, would have come into existence by logical necessity.

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from my religious perspective, it's hard to imagine a more terrifying story than Melito's story from the "Citadel of the Autarch" of "The Cock, the

Angel, and the Eagle", especially as that story was revisited and affirmed as true in "Urth of the New Sun." The point is that within TBOTNS Mr. Wolfe himself generates an alternative religious interpretation of the world

in which his story takes place, something that an atheistic would be much more comfortable with than a priest. (Though there's also plenty of room for the priest's interpretation.) To me, this ambiguity is most excellent and makes the work, not only uplifting (as would be a purely religious work), but also subtly frightening.

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FWIW, this is exactly and precisely what Roman Catholic James Blish does in his classic *A Case of Conscience.* Wolfe shares Blish's Thomism. Blish provides both a "nature" version of the story, and a "grace" version of the story, and only the "eye of faith" can see which version is the more "ultimate" explanation of events. It would not surprise me if Wolfe, who certainly knows Blish's work, would do the same thing.

Nutria

David Stockhoff — 05 May 2012, 12:41 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

Thanks Daniel. I guess I just barely missed that discussion.

i should have known that the Church had worked out a "model" for how the Gospels were developed. Reproducing it is exactly what Wolfe would do. And he would reproduce it naturalistically with all its faults, doubts, and errors, which only "prove the rule." I have no doubt as to the "best" interpretation, but the others are equally valid.

On 5/5/2012 5:20 AM, Daniel Petersen wrote:

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Enough.

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But then I'm the guy who thinks "Westwind" may be a sinister story.

Still, I agree that "[t]here is a sense in which telling a story from a third-person, omniscient viewpoint is cheating."

There is. And there is another sense in which all stories are told from that viewpoint, even those told by a limited and unreliable first-person narrator. The reader (well, all but the most childlike and passive reader) sits outside the universe of discourse and, if not omniscient, is at least outside the viewpoint of the narrator, judging it. Without that basic fact,

the concept of an unreliable narrator would be entirely meaningless.

Sure that happens, but I'm not sure that means it's a good idea. I'm not sure, but I have the suspicion that allowing ourselves to really believe in that feeling of having an outside, objective viewpoint is the source of many evils. "Unreliable narrator" may in fact be a meaningless, or at least tautologous concept. Or rather, it's the idea of a completely reliable narrator that is a fallacy.

Again: "We never know the world that way."

No, we don't. But somehow we _conceive_ the world that way. We have a sense that there is a single, coherent reality, even if our own limited knowledge can never get at it.

This is a good point. We're always telling ourselves 3rd-person omniscient stories about the world. Is that a mistake? I don't know.

-Rostrum

From: James Jordan <jbjordan4 at home.com <mailto:jbjordan4 at home.com>>
Subject: Re: (whorl) Fallible Narrators
Date: Mon, 11 Jun 2001 09:14:14

At 03:40 PM 6/10/2001 -0400, Rostrum wrote:

I think part of what Wolfe is doing is this: If there are those who doubt someone so good as Silk could exist, or that he could really be enlightened by the Outsider, or that any god like the Outsider could really exist, then they are free to think that Horn embellished or was mistaken. Perhaps Wolfe is being a gentleman; he doesn't insist that you accept the existence of God in order to enjoy his story.

There is a sense in which telling a story from a third-person, omniscient viewpoint is cheating.

Perhaps a slightly different take, which may be part of Wolfe's motivation. Silk is Christlike, but he's not Christ. TBLS is like the gospels, but it's not the gospels. Wolfe is a conservative Christian, so he believes the gospels as originally written were "inspired and infallible" and that they have been preserved accurately in the Church. TBLS does not have these divine attributes. Thus:

Gospels : TBLS :: Jesus : Silk

With TBSS we move one step farther away from infallibility. TBSS is not a second-order version of part of the Bible, but is the life of a saint. But again, from a Roman Catholic standpoint, there is always the question of what REALLY happened in the life of a saint. (Remember the controversy a few years ago when the Vatican began to question whether St. Nicholas ever really lived.) Thus, in the order of perfection and infallibility:

Gospels : TBLS : TBSS :: Jesus : Silk : Horn/Narrator(s)

Maybe such considerations played no part in Wolfe's thinking,
but
they make a kind of sense, given what he has done in these two books.

Nutria

From: James Jordan <jbjordan4 at home.com <mailto:jbjordan4 at home.com>>
Subject: Re: (whorl) Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible
Date: Mon, 11 Jun 2001 09:21:16

At 08:35 PM 6/10/2001 -0500, you wrote:

Where is the religious ambiguity in TBOTNS? Well, for instance, I think, almost certainly, that Master Ash's bleak and scientific outlook depicted part of that ambiguity. Maybe, too, the notion visited in "Sword of the Lictor" that, if the universe had existed for an infinite time, all things, including angels, would have come into existence by logical necessity. And, from my religious perspective, it's hard to imagine a more terrifying story than Melito's story from the "Citadel of the Autarch" of "The Cock, the Angel, and the Eagle", especially as that story was revisited and affirmed as true in "Urth of the New Sun." The point is that within TBOTNS Mr. Wolfe himself generates an alternative religious interpretation of the world in which his story takes place, something that an atheistic would be much more comfortable with than a priest. (Though there's also plenty of room for the priest's interpretation.) To me, this ambiguity is most excellent and makes the work, not only uplifting (as would be a purely religious work), but also subtly frightening.

Imperator

FWIW, this is exactly and precisely what Roman Catholic James Blish does in his classic *A Case of Conscience.* Wolfe shares Blish's Thomism. Blish provides both a "nature" version of the story, and a "grace" version of the story, and only the "eye of faith" can see which version is the more "ultimate" explanation of events. It would not surprise me if Wolfe, who certainly knows Blish's work, would do the same thing.

Nutria

Gerry Quinn — 05 May 2012, 13:31 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

From: Daniel Petersen

From: "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>

[old post]

In the case of the BOOK OF THE LONG SUN, we feel like we have the product of Stage 3, but the Narrator's comments in SHORT

SUN lead us to wonder whether we might actually have a corrupt copy, and how corrupt?

Which comments?

And where is the following from?

"What can we believe about this text or its contents? By itself, it is completely incapable of witnessing to its own veracity, and we are not even capable of coming to certainty on what the text actually does say in some places; yet many have believed and do believe that it is a true account of the most important thing that ever happened in this world. To believe that it is completely made up by its author or authors seems impossible; to believe that it is accurate, on a word-by-word, factual basis, seems even more impossible (though there are some extremists who in fact believe each of those things)."

- Gerry Quinn

David Duffy — 06 May 2012, 23:54 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

On Sat, 5 May 2012, Daniel Petersen wrote:
Just in case you've joined this list less than five years ago, like me, I want to share what I thought was a pretty incredible piece of analysis from ol' Dan! just over a decade ago

Yes, I thought this was so obviously the model.

FWIW, this is exactly and precisely what Roman Catholic James Blish does in his classic *A Case of Conscience.

I can only nitpick backwards in time ;) to say, Blish was not Catholic - rather, agnostic through most of his life, becoming Anglican close to his death. When checking my memory, I just found the rather interesting:

<http://www.zen118085.zen.co.uk/blish/cslewisandjamesblish.htm>

Not directly on Wolfe, but maybe some three way comparisons would be fruitful.

Cheers, David Duffy.

Daniel Petersen — 07 May 2012, 10:22 · in reply to David Duffy

Yes, to their credit, the corrections you've noted regarding Blish were thrashed out in the ensuing dialogue of the original thread. And yeah, that article looks like it could be useful for analysing Wolfe.

-DOJP

On Mon, May 7, 2012 at 12:54 AM, David Duffy <David.Duffy at qimr.edu.au> wrote:
On Sat, 5 May 2012, Daniel Petersen wrote:

Just in case you've joined this list less than five years ago, like me, I want to share what I thought was a pretty incredible piece of analysis from ol' Dan! just over a decade ago

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Not directly on Wolfe, but maybe some three way comparisons would be fruitful.

Cheers, David Duffy.

_____*_*_____

pinlighter — 07 May 2012, 10:56 · in reply to David Duffy

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

From: "David Duffy" <David.Duffy at qimr.edu.au>
<http://www.zen118085.zen.co.uk/blish/cslewisandjamesblish.htm>
Cheers, David Duffy.

Marvellous essay!!!

I have probably already told the list how, thirty years and more ago, I was in Oxford doing my degree, and went looking for C S Lewis' grave: but I went to the wrong churchyard, and chanced upon James Blish???

<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gsr&GSfn=james&GSmn=&GSln=blish&GSbyrel=all&GSby=&GSdyrel=all&GSdy=&GScntry=5&GSst=0&GSgrid=&df=all&GSob=n>

Lee Berman — 07 May 2012, 14:06 · follows pinlighter

Daniel Petersen: I want to share what I thought was a pretty incredible piece of analysis from ol' Dan! just over a decade ago

Thanks, Daniel. It is great to have this discussion brought back to attention. My current view of the Sun Series is framed as a SF-oriented view of pagan pre-Christianity as the precursor to a Christian world. If the end of the series can be seen as organized in a manner similar to the origin of Christianity it fits nicely with my view.