

# "Sci-Fi's Difficult Genius", Peter Bebergal

The Urth list — 11 messages, 8 voices, 24 Apr 2015

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6735>

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Gwern Branwen — 24 Apr 2015, 15:34

"Sci-Fi's Difficult Genius", Peter Bebergal

<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/sci-fis-difficult-genius>

On the phone from his home in Peoria, Gene Wolfe explained to me recently that Latro's memory loss does not make him an unreliable narrator, as many critics assume. Instead, Latro might reveal only the truth that matters. Latro must ask himself, Wolfe said, "What is worth writing, what is going to be of value to me when I read it in the future" What will I want to know? These are questions that Wolfe has been asking himself, in one form or another, for decades. His stories and novels are rich with riddles, mysteries, and sleights of textual hand. His working lexicon is vast, and his plots are unspooled by narrators who deliberately confuse or are confused or both.

...Moments like this have turned many of Wolfe's fans into something like Biblical exegetes, who dig deep into his texts in the hope of finding clues not only to the plots and the characters but to Wolfe's larger intentions. Partly what readers are excavating is Wolfe's Catholicism, which he is quick to say figures into his writing. "What is impossible is to keep it out," he told me. "The author cannot prevent the work being his or hers." Flannery O'Connor, in her essay "Novelist and Believer," cautions novelists to use religious concerns in ways that do not alienate the reader, to render encounters with the ineffable so that even those who might not understand or care for a particular metaphor? Aslan the Lion as Christ, for example can still be moved by it. Many critics have speculated that Severian is a Christ figure: he brings the New Sun and puts an end to the cruelty of torture. But Wolfe wraps his Catholicism in strange language and cryptic images. Truth of any kind, no matter how closely you read, is hard to come by in Wolfe's books. And yet, over time, it does seem to emerge.

During his journey, Latro is accompanied by another soldier, a black man whose name he doesn't know. Though Latro keeps forgetting what they have gone through together, their friendship builds. "The heart remembers," Latro says, "even when no trace of face or voice remains." This man comes running up to him, "shouting, his arms in the air," and though Latro does "not know where we met or why I love him (though no doubt those things are written somewhere on this scroll)," he can't stop smiling. "Without thinking at all about what I should do," he tells us, "I embraced him as a brother."

This passage comes to mind when Wolfe, over the phone, tells me about grappling in his own life with the complicated questions of memory and truth that he has long been thinking through in his novels. His wife, Rosemary, suffered from Alzheimer's disease; she died in December, 2013. "There was a time when she did not remember my name or that we were married, but she still remembered that she loved me," Wolfe recalled. His narrators may be prophets, or liars, or merely crazy, but somewhere in their stories they help to reveal what Wolfe most wants his readers to know: that compassion can withstand the most brutal of futures and exist on the most distant planets, and it has been part of us since ages long past.

gwern  
<http://www.gwern.net>

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Gerry Quinn — 24 Apr 2015, 17:41 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

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- Gerry Quinn

On 24/04/2015 16:34, Gwern Branwen wrote:

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Marc Aramini — 24 Apr 2015, 20:05 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

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Marc Aramini — 24 Apr 2015, 20:12 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

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On Apr 24, 2015 1:08 PM, "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:  
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Jeffery Wilson [clueland.com](http://clueland.com) — 26 Apr 2015, 00:58 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On 4/24/2015 3:08 PM, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

I've always wondered about that phrase, "unwashed Philistines." Is there any reason to believe that Philistines bathed less frequently than their neighbors?

Inquiring minds want to know.

I believe it is a compound insult, drawing from Bulwer-Lytton's "the great unwashed" and the secondary sense of unrefined and uneducated that arose from a minister's metaphorical use of "the Philistines are upon us" during a time of bad sentiment between the townsfolk and the scholars of Johannesburg a couple centuries ago.

Jeff Wilson - <[jwilson@clueland.com](mailto:jwilson@clueland.com)>  
A&M Texarkana Computational Intelligence Lab

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

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David Stockhoff — 26 Apr 2015, 17:56 · in reply to Jeffery Wilson clueland.com

Could well be. I might have guessed "Hebrew propaganda" but only out of cynicism, not out of any actual knowledge.

On 4/25/2015 8:58 PM, Jeffery Wilson clueland.com wrote:

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Jeffery Wilson clueland.com — 26 Apr 2015, 18:10 · in reply to David Stockhoff

On 4/26/2015 12:56 PM, David Stockhoff wrote:

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That's a part of it; the David and Goliath metaphor is built into our culture and of course Goliath was champion of the Philistines. IIRC this was also used to mean uncultured readers by a 19thC literary magazine, but I can't locate the reference just now.

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Norwood, Frederick Hudson — 27 Apr 2015, 11:59 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Sounds like the unwashed beatniks of my youthful years.

Rick

From: Urth [<mailto:urth-bounces@lists.urth.net>] On Behalf Of Marc Aramini Sent: Friday, April 24, 2015 4:12 PM To: The Urth Mailing List Subject: Re: (urth) "Sci-Fi's Difficult Genius", Peter Bebergal

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Norwood, Frederick Hudson — 27 Apr 2015, 12:09 · in reply to Jeffery Wilson  
clueland.com

Unwashed philistines to mean uncultured people was quite common at one time, or sometimes just used by the upper class to mean working class people.

Rick

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

From: Urth [mailto:urth-bounces at lists.urth.net] On Behalf Of Jeffery Wilson clueland.com Sent: Sunday, April 26, 2015 2:11 PM To: The Urth Mailing List Subject: Re: (urth) "Sci-Fi's Difficult Genius", Peter Bebergal

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Lee — 27 Apr 2015, 16:47 · follows Norwood, Frederick Hudson

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes: I've always wondered about that phrase, "unwashed Philistines." Is there any reason to believe that Philistines bathed less frequently than their neighbors?

Given the desert environment they lived in, bathing was probably a less frequent occasion than for people living in areas with higher rainfall (and thus fresh water reserves).

Personal hygiene seems to have been a defining cultural feature of the Abrahamic religions which (along with dietary restrictions) helped distinguish them from their "unwashed" neighbors.

Ritual bathing was a part of Judaism (pre-cursor to baptism) and Islam, and circumcision was a related cleanliness-type practice also.