

Preferring the Given

The Whorl list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 28 Mar 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1296>

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Michael Straight — 28 Mar 2001, 09:50

There is an idea in Christianity (with parallels in other religions, I imagine) that one must not cling too tightly to one's own desires and expectations, lest one miss the good things that God wants to give you that you would never have asked for or imagined yourself. C.S. Lewis called this idea "preferring the given" and it features prominently in *Perelandra*.

As I was reading SS, it seemed to me that you could see Wolfe's writting as a sort of school for practicing this virtue. He continually whets your appetite for something, makes you want the story to go in a certain direction, and if you cling to that desire you will be frustrated over and over. But if you let go and let Wolfe take you where he will, you will see wonders.

If you had told me after I finished OBW that instead of Horn, Sinew, and Krait trying (failing?) to love each other in the Amazing and Horrible Jungles of Green I was going to get astral travel and hardly anything about Horn and Sinew's relationship, I would have been very annoyed. And I was a little sad not to see some of those things in IGJ, yet I thought IGJ was fantastic, and by the time I got to RTTW I was perfectly happy to see whatever Wolfe wanted to show me, and if that meant missing most of Hornsilk's trial so we can read about him chatting with Marrow's widow, I have to admit I still loved pretty much every page of it.

-Rostrum

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Dan Parmenter — 28 Mar 2001, 17:46 · follows Michael Straight

Rostrum writes:

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Yes, this is an excellent point, and I think it's also true of the things that some of us found annoying, such as the image of "astral Oreb" as a tentacled hairy dwarf in IGJ. I, and many others, read this and found it pretty silly and out of place, and yet by the time we get the explanation for this in RTTW, I found myself nodding and agreeing that given Wolfe's seeming "astral travel model" the depiction of Oreb was entirely consistent to that model. This is just one example.

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I'll agree with you there, though there are certain things about the series, IGJ in particular that bother me such as Auk and Chenille being reduced to less than a cameo appearance, but in general, I think you're right on the money here.

Later, you also wrote:

From: Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu>
So perhaps I can be forgiven for feeling, when Horn mentioned how the kite builder told them stuff they put in their book, that Wolfe was talking directly to me, and, when Horn mentions it for the THIRD time, that Wolfe thinks my bulb is particularly dim.

(And there are at least a couple more comments Horn makes about getting information about Patera Q from time spent with him and from talking with Patera R that also seemed to be addressing the same issue. Cringe.)

"Thought you'd caught me out, eh? Didn't think I'd properly thought out this whole narrator business? Well let me explain every detail slow-ly and care-ful-ly."

Hey, don't be so hard on yourself. And if Wolfe really was reacting to you, I'd think you'd be flattered! If anything, perhaps he was being hard on himself.

Shellac

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Michael Straight — 28 Mar 2001, 20:54 · follows Dan Parmenter

On 28 Mar 2001, Dan Parmenter wrote:
From: Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu>
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Hey, don't be so hard on yourself. And if Wolfe really was reacting to you, I'd think you'd be flattered! If anything, perhaps he was being hard on himself.

Chagrin at Wolfe being hard on himself was what I was really getting at. I didn't literally think he was talking to me. I was just a little sad that he felt the need to spell all that out. The question wasn't so much "Can Wolfe cover all the narrative bases?" as "Do Horn and Nettle take some poetic licesnse here and there?" and I was actually happier with a few loose ends that seemed to point in that direction. (Fortunately, we can transfer all that now to wondering about the stuff by Hoof et. al.)

Wolfe seems surprisingly less interested in that kind of ambiguity--witness his willingness in interviews to directly undercut Crane's point of view and say that, yes, the Outsider is real--considering how good he is at creating it.

-Rostrum

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