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The Whorl list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 17 Apr 2001

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Timothy Reilly — 17 Apr 2001, 02:26

Kieran Cleary wrote of my querying the quote from "Father" re Typhon's daughter Scylla at p 360 of RTTW ("the daughter who had pledged herself in secret to one of the sea gods of the Short Sun Whorl that would in time become our Red Sun Whorl"):

'Short Sun Whorl' is a generic term. The particular SS Whorl mentioned here is the one 'that would in time become our RS Whorl', i.e. Urth. Nothing more than that, I think.

"Short Sun Whorl" in the series is most often a reference to the Blue/Green system, though I agree that it is occasionally used generically to indicate planetary systems in general rather than the Long Sun. But IIRC when used generically it is (as you'd expect) not capitalised. Nevertheless I agree that the sentence can only be read as "Short Sun Whorl" being used generically, despite the capitalization. Another proofreading lapse?

You'll find Clute's review at

<http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue197/excess.html>

Thanks.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote of my description of astral travel as "nonsense":

Modulo the idea that it was "nonsense," yes. Mr. Wolfe, who writes "science-fantasy" (more accurately: he writes science fiction that makes some different assumptions about the nature of physical reality than do most SF writers), is entitled to posit astral travel if he chooses; dislike it if you choose, but to call it nonsense wrt Wolfe's universe-of-discourse seems rather petty.

"Petty"...well it substantially decreased my enjoyment of the series, and leads directly to the issue discussed previously as to whether Wolfe is writing Science Fiction or Science Fantasy. It is something of a disappointment to find it's the latter after the earlier books in this "universe of discourse" (TBNS and TBLS) suggested the former. As I've asked before, why doesn't the Narrator try to astral travel to Seawrack or Nettle (the two places he repeatedly says he wants to be) once he's discovered this useful ability? The rules of astral travel don't seem sufficiently clear to rule this out. Instead he goes (involuntarily it seems) to Green, and (it seems eventually voluntarily) to Urth. The problem with giving characters these magic abilities is that it's irritating when they don't use them (or at least try to use them) in the way that would be rational given the motivations they've described.

Plus, there's no plausible mechanism for astral travel even suggested, unlike the mirrors in TBNS or the descriptions in LS of how the gods possess people. I wouldn't mind so much if SS was unconnected with these - but as you point out, it's not.

RTTW lacked the lyricism of both OBW and (to a lesser extent) IGJ and for me was too full of the juvenilia of the LS series.

Juvenilia of the LS series? What on _earth_ are you talking about?
LONG is quite possibly the most mature sf series I have ever read.

What on _urth_ I'm talking about is that TBLS is IMHO (and not only mine...) clearly juvenilia by the standards Wolfe established in TBNS, especially in terms of narrative style but also content. I won't repeat discussions that are in the archives. Obviously such aesthetic judgments involve matters of opinion. That's mine.

And really, what _is_ all this stuff about the past, future or present "gods of Blue"? Some seem to be space aliens (the Mother), some Long Sun computer scans of human beings (Pas et al) that in some unexplained way may or may not in future take up residence on Blue, some are related to the Neighbours, PLUS there's the "real" God the Outsider. How many gods does a planet need? Are the "minor" gods of the LS whorl all originally other friends etc of Typhon (eg Kypris)? Seems logical, but then who are the likely candidates for eg Quadrifons? What does "god" mean in the LS and SS series? It's one thing to have a society ruled by computer scans of former people who are treated as gods (LS); it's another to have a planet where "god" means all or any of the above.

Tim

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

Michael Straight — 17 Apr 2001, 11:16 · follows Timothy Reilly

On Tue, 17 Apr 2001, Timothy Reilly wrote:

And really, what _is_ all this stuff about the past, future or present "gods of Blue"? Some seem to be space aliens (the Mother), some Long Sun computer scans of human beings (Pas et al) that in some unexplained way may or may not in future take up residence on Blue, some are related to the Neighbours, PLUS there's the "real" God the Outsider. How many gods does a planet need?

The best estimate I can make, based on my available sample of one planet, is thousands and thousands (Thor, Aphrodite, Molech, Baal, Allah, YHWH, Jesus, Shiva, Ganesha, Aura Mainyu, Cuchullin, Gaia, Isis, Ra, Brahma, Kartar, Thetans, the August Personage of Jade, Cthulhu...). Some seem to be space aliens, some seem to be deified human beings that may or may not in the future take up residence on Earth, some are related to indigenous peoples, PLUS there's the "real" God...

-Rostrum

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

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 17 Apr 2001, 11:33 · follows Michael Straight

Timothy Reilly objected to my use of the word "petty" wrt Wolfe's use of astral travel.

"Petty"...well it substantially decreased my enjoyment of the series,

I would suggest that this has far more to do with your expectations of what is and what isn't "science fiction" than to do with the quality of the writing.

and leads directly to the issue discussed previously as to whether Wolfe is writing Science Fiction or Science Fantasy.

I stand by my claim: Mr Wolfe is writing science fiction, but does not make the same assumptions most SF writers do about the nature of (physical and other) reality.

t is something of a disappointment to find it's the latter after the earlier books in this "universe of discourse" (TBNS and TBLs) suggested the former.

Granted NEW made some handwaving attempts to offer pseudoscientific explanations for ... some of ... the Miracles of Severian, how anyone can read LONG without recognizing right up front that Silk's enlightenment on page one is an unvarnished miracle is quite beyond me. NEW is, in Mr Wolfe's own words, an attempt at theodicy -- "the justification of the ways of God to Man." LONG is (among many, many other things) an extended meditation on the process of Divine revelation. It is perhaps best read in light of the SOLDIER books; Mr Wolfe has some very definite opinions (well, perhaps "opinions" is too strong a word: "speculations") about the reality of Pagan gods. I have long suspected that if Mr Wolfe had continued that series Latro would have had some experience or experiences leading him to or towards monotheism.

No; if "the intrusion of the miraculous into the story" forces a book into the pigeonhole labelled "Science Fantasy," then LONG and NEW belong in that pigeonhole quite as much as does SHORT.

As I've asked before, why doesn't the Narrator try to astral travel to Seawrack or Nettle (the two places he repeatedly says he wants to be) once he's discovered this useful ability?

Why he doesn't _try_ is an interesting question and may reveal something about the Narr; or it may perhaps be an omission on Mr Wolfe's part. "Even Homer nods."

I think it is fairly clear, though, that it could not have succeeded -- Horn seems to be able to astral-travel (a) only in the presence of an inhum[u]a and (b) only to places that someone with whom he is astral-travelling has been, i.e., to Green (because all the inhumis have been there, pretty much by definition) or Urth (because wossisface of Soldo has been there).

The rules of astral travel don't seem sufficiently clear to rule this out. Instead he goes (involuntarily it seems) to Green, and (it seems eventually voluntarily) to Urth.

Hoom. I think it's a bit more complicated than that. _First_ he goes involuntarily to Green. Later, he goes semi-voluntarily to Green. In _Return_, he goes (I believe) voluntarily to Green. His first trip to Urth is semi-accidental. His final trip to Urth is quite deliberate, and is possible only because Scaldin' Scylla, who is present in Oreb, has been there.

The problem with giving characters these magic abilities is that it's irritating when they don't use them (or at least try to use them) in the way that would be rational given the motivations they've described.

Again, agreed in principle; the question then is whether this is a failure on Mr Wolfe's part (as it might be) or some clue to the actual (as opposed to claimed) motivations of the Narr. Given Mr Wolfe's demonstrated skill as a writer of unreliable narrators, I think it is at least worth while to spend some time (a year or so) living with the assumption that there is something more there before tossing the books aside as miswritten.

Plus, there's no plausible mechanism for astral travel even suggested, unlike the mirrors in TBNS or the descriptions in LS of how the gods possess people.

But very much like the transmogrification of water to wine in NEW and the enlightenment of Silk in LONG...

Juvenilia of the LS series? What on _earth_ are you talking about? LONG is quite possibly the most mature sf series I have ever read.

What on _urth_ I'm talking about is that TBLS is IMHO (and not only mine...) clearly juvenilia by the standards Wolfe established in TBNS, especially in terms of narrative style but also content.

Interesting: I would say that in terms of style, LONG manages the subtlety of NEW without the outright obscurity. In terms of content, well, chacun à son gout et tout comme ça, but I see the difference between a story which, when the cool stuff is stripped away, is basically about what leadership and sacrifice really are, and a story which, when the _really_ cool stuff is stripped away, is basically standard SF wish-fulfillment about the young outcast's rise to power. And the latter by you is more mature? Ah, well...

(Mind you, I am not dismissing NEW as juvenilia by any means.)

And really, what _is_ all this stuff about the past, future or present "gods of Blue"?

Early days yet; I can't say.

How many gods does a planet need?

One ... provided it's the _right_ God. 8*)

As Michael S. pointed out, the only example we have to point at suggests that, however many gods a planet actually _needs_, it seems to accumulate rather terrifying numbers of them. At times the history of Earth religions makes Dunsany's "Gods of Pegana" look quite plausible.

Are the "minor" gods of the LS whorl all originally other friends etc of Typhon (eg Kypris)?

No. The Outsider is "a minor god."

What does "god"" mean in the LS and SS series?

It is a deliberately ambiguous, multivalued and multiordinal term. The Outsider is _not_ a god in the same sense as the Mother. Neither is a god in the same sense as Pas. None of these is a god in the same sense that Scylla-in-Oreb is a goddess. Furthermore, Pas and Passilk and Kypris, all in Mainframe, are not gods in quite the same sense.

It's one thing to have a society ruled by computer scans of former people who are treated as gods (LS); it's another to have a planet where "god" means all or any of the above.

Yes, it is. And your point is? I mean, ambiguity from Wolfe? Who'd'a thunk it?

--Dan'l

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