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The Whorl list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 19 Apr 2001

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Timothy Reilly — 19 Apr 2001, 04:24

In whorl.v012.n106, Rostrum wrote in response to my question "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...

A nice riposte. I was going to write that my question was rhetorical, but this would get us back to individual statements of religious belief...

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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

No. The Outsider is "a minor god."

Yes, I know but is clearly miscategorised as such. What about Quadrifons, Thyone et al ie the "real" minor gods?

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.

This is what troubles me. LS at least drew a distinction between the real thing (the Outsider) and the computer scans of malevolent human beings in Mainframe (called "gods" but really technological manifestations). But TBSS blows this out by using "god" to mean almost anything, and thereby depriving the concept of any real meaning. At least, I can't define what a "god" means in TBSS. If it can mean a space alien (the Mother), why aren't the Neighbours (or even theoretically the inhumani) "gods"? They're not, but the Neighbours we're told have "gods" of their own. We're never told the difference even in the Narrator's mind between all these. I could understand if he groped his way to the conclusion that the only real god is the Outsider, but while he often suggests this it doesn't disqualify all the others as also being described as "gods" by him too. One wonders what his definition of a god is.

I don't want to flog a dead horse much longer re astral travel, but Dan'l said:

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.

Re LS I don't agree that a subjective sense of enlightenment that may or may not be due to an aneurism can possibly be compared with FTL astral travel that breaks every physical rule in the book of science. I agree that in NS "miracles" occurred but not anywhere near this order (at least until it started falling apart with TUNS, but that's another dead horse that has been flogged enough...).

Re why the Narrator doesn't at least try to astral travel somewhere he says he wants to be:

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).

Exactly - even if the Narrator having been somewhere before can't count (so perhaps ruling out Seawrack), Hoof/Hide have been to Nettle's place on Lizard. So he could at least try to go there. But despite all his many protestations about his longing to be back with Nettle he instead goes across planetary voids to nasty places like Green and Urth. Since you appear to agree that on some occasions at least the Narrator is voluntarily choosing where to go, this just doesn't make sense. Or it leads to absurd additions to the rules that make the whole concept even more unacceptable.

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.

Much as I admire Mr Wolfe (TBNS is the Book of Gold for me, as for many others), I've said before on this list that we don't need to be hagiographic about every word he writes. To quote alga, TBSS is not the Torah. We know Wolfe made mistakes near the end of TBLS in mixing up Mint and Marble. My impression, both from such examples and the proofreading of TBLS/SS is that he's not as careful as he was in writing TBNS. Certainly he clearly didn't write TBLS and TBSS in advance, unlike TBNS. And the number of hanging characters (eg Master Xiphias) and events (eg the long, boring visit to the talus factory in LS that some predicted would find relevance in SS) suggest to me that, sadly, Homer is nodding. As he's entitled to - he has created a marvellous body of work and is getting on, after all.

Tim

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

Michael Straight — 19 Apr 2001, 09:26 · follows Timothy Reilly

On Thu, 19 Apr 2001, Timothy Reilly wrote:
blows this out by using "god" to mean almost anything, and thereby depriving the concept of any real meaning. At least, I can't define what a "god" means in TBSS. If it can mean a space alien (the Mother), why aren't the

Neighbours (or even theoretically the inhumani) "gods"? They're not, but the Neighbours we're told have "gods" of their own. We're never told the difference even in the Narrator's mind between all these. [snip] One wonders what his definition of a god is.

My impression is that Horn uses the same definition I used when listing the gods of Earth; a god is one who has been worshipped^[1] by somebody sometime somewhere. Gods can be powerful, not powerful, space aliens, not space aliens, existent or non-existent.

Horn|Silk does muse about whether a given god is a "true" god, which seems to mean that the god really exists and is really powerful (e.g. Pas loses points for being stuck on the whorl), and maybe even that the god is worthy of one's trust/love/worship (that seems to be what is meant when Silk is said to have not credited any god save the Outsider when he knew firsthand that Scylla was real and powerful).

-Rostrum

[1] Using a broad definition of worship to include fear, desire to placate, or even recognize with respect--I'm not sure the Greeks or the Chinese actually worshipped every god they told stories about, but their recognizing them as gods is what makes them gods in the sense Horn seems to use the word. Even if nobody worships Quadrafons, he's still a god because he's listed as such in the Writings.

-Rostrum

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

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 19 Apr 2001, 09:44 · follows Michael Straight

Tim Reilly, in response to my remark that "god" in SS is "a deliberately ambiguous, multivalued and multiordinal term,"

wrote:

This is what troubles me. LS at least drew a distinction between the real thing (the Outsider) and the computer scans of malevolent human beings in Mainframe (called "gods" but really technological manifestations). But TBSS blows this out by using "god" to mean almost anything, and thereby depriving the concept of any real meaning. At least, I can't define what a "god" means in TBSS.

Try this: The Narr uses (or seems to use) the word "god" to refer to a general concept, "beings vastly more powerful than bios and chems, who use their power to manipulate or influence the behavior of bios and chems, and want [or seem to want] obedience and ritual worship from bios and chems."

Great Scylla, the Outsider, and the Pas-and-His-Pals show certainly fit this description. The Mother is more problematic, in that she does not show any immediate sign of wanting human worship, but then the Narr refers to her as one of the gods of the Neighbors, and assumes (rightly or wrongly) that they worshipped her.

The key point here is that this is, more or less, what "god" meant to a pre-monotheistic pagan -- again, vide also the Soldier books for more on Wolfe's thought on this subject. The Whorl is a pagan society with no real clue of the existence of a unique God (Pas, like Zeus and Odin, is more a "first among equals" than a singular God of the sort believed by the J/C/I tradition and postulated by Aristotle); Silk's enlightenment marks a transitional point at which monotheism

begins to supplant paganism.

About which more below.

If it can mean a space alien (the Mother), why aren't the Neighbours (or even theoretically the inhumani) "gods"?

Nowhere near the order of power represented by the Mother, great Scylla, etc.; nor do they show any intention to be worshipped by humans -- though both do in fact manipulate humans: but then, so do humans manipulate other humans.

We're never told the difference even in the Narrator's mind between all these.

Ummmm... I don't think there is, at first, a clear distinction.

I could understand if he groped his way to the conclusion that the only real god is the Outsider, but while he often suggests this it doesn't disqualify all the others as also being described as "gods" by him too. One wonders what his definition of a god is.

I've made a suggestion above.

I think that the Narr, like just-Silk, comes to the conclusion (the correct conclusion, certainly from my point of view and Mr Wolfe's) that, regardless of the existence in nature (including technology; "nature" here means "the physical universe") of beings of vast power, the being referred to in the series as "the Outsider," and in the NEW books as "the Increate," is a being of a higher and different order, and transcendent wrt nature. On the other hand, the acceptance of this one God does not instantaneously wipe out in the minds of either Silk or the Narr the existence of "gods." This is consistent, btw, with the history of monotheism among the Hebrews; in the earlier Writings, it's clear that, though God is God and Israel is to have but one God, there are other "gods." This is why the Decalogue has that very odd wording, "you will have no other god before me"; this is why the Israelites keep worshipping the local gods of the territories they conquer; and this is why, for example, the priests of Egypt actually are able to work miracles in their small way. It's a big step from the nearly pantheistic view of paganism to the idea of a single immanent-and-transcendent God; it's another step, nearly as big, to the idea that these other things aren't gods at all -- so big that the early Church couldn't think of any other way to account for these "gods" except as demons. (Yes, Paul wrote, as did a few of the more advanced OT writers, of the idea that these "gods" were just things made by human hands; but the early Church was not, in general, as advanced in its thought as Paul; and it believed, as does Wolfe, as do I, that belief in these "gods" came from somewhere more than just the imaginations of the believers. For that matter, Mister Orthodox himself, C.S. Lewis, seems to have believed, or at least considered plausible, something of the sort -- viz. the wizard on the island of the Dufflepuds (in THE VOYAGE OF THE "DAWN TREADER") and the entire novel TILL WE HAVE FACES.

Anyway, both Silk and the Narr are persons raised from infancy with the above-described pagan conception of "a god." Persons raised in a Christian or post-Christian environment find it very difficult (I know I did for years) to really grasp the very different way in which someone raised pagan -- really raised pagan, I mean, and not in the semi-serious neopagan headset, which is more postmodern than ancient -- understands the concept of "a god." Even Silk's prayer is not "I know that you are the only God," but "I know that you are the only god for me."

The gods of Mainframe, the Outsider, pose no special problem. The Mother and Great Scylla certainly fit the overall definition; the only problem seems to be that they are different from the gods the Whorlians grew up with. But that would not, in fact, be a problem for the

Whorlians, who knew all along that Pas'n'Co are the gods of the Long Sun Whorl and that there were other gods on the old Short Sun Whorl (though they believe that Pas had been one such). This is roughly analogous to the way that the Greeks and Romans would travel to another country and quite placidly accept that the folks here had different gods -- though, to be sure, the more intellectual sort of Greek in later years tended to start classifying the gods of foreign parts as to what Greek god they "really" were: Thoth is "really" Hermes and all that sort of thing.

Timothy, I thank you for calling my attention to this point, because, while I hadn't really realized it until you did, this is actually one of Wolfe's clearest successes in the Long and Short Sun books: he successfully portrays, from within, the attitudes of a pagan who is just beginning to grapple with the idea of One immanent and transcendent God.

Continuing to flog the red spot on the pavement where the dead horse used to be:

Re LS I don't agree that a subjective sense of enlightenment that may or may not be due to an aneurism can possibly be compared with FTL astral travel that breaks every physical rule in the book of science.

Pfui. Crane's hypothesis doesn't hold water for thirty seconds; Silk gains too much actual knowledge from his enlightenment to be the result of an aneurism. You can try explaining it away as the momentary emergence of some random psychic power, but it ain't no aneurism.

I agree that in NS "miracles" occurred but not anywhere near this order

Ummm. The resurrection of the dead (including the long-dead, i.e., Typhon -- maybe -- and Apu-Punchau -- definitely) isn't "anywhere near this order?" The fight with the Sorcerers doesn't "break every physical rule in the book of science"? Pish and tosh.

Re why the Narrator doesn't at least try to astral travel somewhere he says he wants to be:

... As I believe I said in an earlier post, I think this is actually revelatory of the Narr's character and not of the limits of astral travel. The Narr is decidedly not a reliable Narr. That being the case, I suspend discussion of the mechanics as not terribly relevant to the question.

Much as I admire Mr Wolfe (TBNS is the Book of Gold for me, as for many others),

I can't go that far, but I can't say any one book is "the Book of Gold" for me. It is a book which I have returned to about ten times and will return to many more times before I shuffle off to Buff, uh, I mean off this mortal coil. I rank it with THE LORD OF THE RINGS, THE DOOMSDAY BOOK (which I recently read: the only novel in years, possibly ever, to make me weep openly), and a select few others as something deserving a word one notch above "masterpiece."

I've said before on this list that we don't need to be hagiographic about every word he writes.

Agreed. (Anyone want to discuss ARES?)

[...]

Certainly he clearly didn't write TBLS and TBSS in advance, unlike TBNS.

Heh. Funny thing -- my understanding was that he had all of SHORT in all-but-last draft form before publishing OBW. And CASTLE OF THE OTTER semi-debunks the standard myth about NEW being completely written before SHADOW was published.

And the number of hanging characters (eg Master Xiphias)

Hanging how? Don't know his fate? What a surprise! Never do!

and events (eg the long, boring visit to the talus factory in LS
that some predicted would find relevance in SS)

Boring? Boring?!? One of my favorite sequences in LONG.

Disgustibus etc.

--Dan'l/Blattid

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