

Fallible Narrators

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 10 Jun 2001

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Michael Straight — 10 Jun 2001, 15:40

On Mon, 4 Jun 2001, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

That said, tBotSS offers the prettiest Lupine problem in time-of-narration since PEACE.

[...]

editors do not object to inserting a few obvious editorial comments into the text; have they made any less obvious comments? Any fictionalizing? Any tonings-down or deletions? Can we even begin to guess? And to what extent are their "reconstructions" of events on the _Whorl_ to be trusted, anyway? How much did the Narr really tell them, how much do they make up? This is the problem of tBotLS grown up and turned very nasty.

I remember feeling this way at the end of tBOTLS, the idea that some of the wonderful things Horn had told me about Silk might have been exaggerations or wishful thinking gave me a certain (fun) chill, but I never felt we have enough evidence to try to go back and sift and somehow uncover the "real" Silk behind Horn's story.

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. We never know the world that way. All we ever know about other people's thoughts is what they tell us. In a sense, almost all of our knowledge is based on trust. If you want to know about Horn and Silk, then you're going to have to trust the people who tell you their stories, and you're going to have to live with the fact that sometimes they will let you down, get it wrong, lie even. We might prefer to have an infallible, omniscient account of what happened, but that kind of knowledge is just a delusion that we never really achieve.

What we're left with is the hope that, though mediated through our own fallibility and the fallibility of others, we can still genuinely know other people's stories, still genuinely know who they are.

You probably see that this is also related to my first point about Wolfe's belief in God. 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?

-Rostrum

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

James Jordan — 11 Jun 2001, 09:14 · follows Michael Straight

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

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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

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