

Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible Copyists: a Textual

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 10 Jun 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1436>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 10 Jun 2001, 15:39

This will wander a little off the Lupine track, but trust me, it's heading straight back there. Some points of Rostrum's screed got my head working, and I've got a basic thesis on what Wolfe is doing and why.

The first of Rostrum's remarks that I responded to was this:

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.

Now, I didn't really get that kind of shock out of the revelation that "I, Horn, wrote this years later, with some help." What I

did get out of it was a weird sense that Wolfe had patterned this whole thing somehow after model the Catholic church uses to describe the formation of the (written) Gospels.

Briefly, for non-[Catholic-Bible-scholars]: The basic idea the Catholic church endorses is that the Gospels were formed in three "layers":

1. The events that actually occurred in the greater Jerusalem metropolitan area ca. 4 BC - 33 AD.
2. The memories of those events carried by eyewitnesses and the communities founded by those eyewitnesses.
3. The setting-down of those memories by the communities, probably late in the first century.

The Catholic answers to questions like "Yeah, but how do we know it's true?" and "Well, what about the way they [seem to] conflict with each other?" are deeply entrenched in that model, but it gets pretty complicated at that point.

Now, what I _think_ we have in Horn's "Book of Silk" is something similar: Horn was, admittedly, an eyewitness to some of these events -- a fairly small proportion of them. He's gone around interviewing people, filled in the details as best he can, and freely admits he made the rest up to complete the narrative. It isn't good historiography, but it suffices; it gives the sense of someone who isn't a historian doing the best he can. The made- up stuff, while perhaps not accurate, isn't a lie, in the sense of an untruth meant to deceive; it is intended to convey a sense of the probable truth.

So we have all three stages compressed into one text:

1. We have Horn's own authentic(?) memories of Silk.
2. We have the community's memories of Silk.

3. The "Book of Silk" _as written by Horn & Nettle_ collecting and collating their own memories with those of the community.

Unfortunately, there's an implicit Stage 4, which is also implicit in the Catholic model: The copyists get hold of the text, and a long time later, scholars try to trace the provenance of textual variants backwards and determine the "true" original text of Stage 3.

In the case of the BOOK OF THE LONG SUN, we feel like we have the product of Stage 3, but the Narrator's comments in SHORT SUN lead us to wonder whether we might actually have a corrupt copy, and how corrupt? Nor do Horn's comments at the end of LONG SUN make it any easier to determine; compare them to the first four verses of the Gospel according to Luke, and then find out how much work goes into preparing a good textual "edition" of that Gospel. Assurances by the author of the text's accuracy do not greatly help when the text has been hand-copied many times.

Which leads me to another of Rostrum's points:

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 though our own fallibility and the fallibility of others, we can still have some genuine knowledge of God?

We have, in THE BOOK OF THE LONG SUN, one of the following:

- a) Horn and Nettle's "Book of Silk"
- b) one of many possible variant texts
- c) someone's "edition" of same

-- and nothing to help us which. We are, in fact, in the precise position of a non-scholarly reader of the Bible, or perhaps (given that this discussion is happening at all) a medieval scholar with no access to modern textual studies.

So: paraphrasing Rostrum, can we hope that, though mediated though our own fallibility and the fallibility of others, we can still have some genuine knowledge of Silk?

I think the answer is, and has to be, "Yes," because the possibility that it's all made-up (within the Lupine universe of discourse) is too drab to be worth discussing.

All this brings me to my basic thesis.

What Wolfe has reproduced, here, is the basic problem of putting faith in a written Scripture. The following paragraph refers equivocally to the Bible (for us, or at least those of us to whom the Bible represents something more than a reactionary symbol of patriarchal oppression) and to The Book of Silk (for a representative inhabitant of the Lupiverse, modulo similar concerns).

"What can we believe about this text or its contents? By itself, it is completely incapable of witnessing to its own veracity, and we are not even capable of coming to certainty on what the text actually does say in some places; yet many have believed and do believe that it is a true account of the most important thing that ever happened in this world. To believe that it is

completely made up by its author or authors seems impossible; to believe that it is accurate, on a word-by-word, factual basis, seems even more impossible (though there are some extremists who in fact believe each of those things)."

Now, when Rostrum writes, "Perhaps Wolfe is being a gentleman; he doesn't insist that you accept the existence of God in order to enjoy his story," I disagree rather vehemently; to deny Silk's enlightenment is to make the whole LONG SUN (and, by transference, SHORT) fall apart, meaningless and incoherent. He even sets that possibility up as a straw man (Crane's cerebral accident theory), and _doesn't_ provide us with arguments about it, because it is ridiculous _prima facie_. There is, I think, no way to take the supernatural element out of the SUN books in any kind of "good faith" (in the existential sense).

Still, I agree that "[t]here is a sense in which telling a story from a third-person, omniscient viewpoint is cheating."

There is. And there is another sense in which all stories are told from that viewpoint, even those told by a limited and unreliable first-person narrator. The reader (well, all but the most childlike and passive reader) sits outside the universe of discourse and, if not omniscient, is at least outside the viewpoint of the narrator, judging it. Without that basic fact, the concept of an unreliable narrator would be entirely meaningless.

Again: "We never know the world that way."

No, we don't. But somehow we _conceive_ the world that way. We have a sense that there is a single, coherent reality, even if our own limited knowledge can never get at it. Living in a universe run by quantum mechanics doesn't really change that; it defines the limits of how much we can know about it. (If there is an omniscient and omnipotent Creator, Heisenberg's Law is a clear and present "No Trespassing" sign.)

Enough.

--Blattid/Dan'I

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