

Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible Copyists: a Textual Consideration of the "Book of Silk"

The Whorl list — 5 messages, 2 voices, 10 Jun 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1438>

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Steve Strickland — 10 Jun 2001, 20:35

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Where is the religious ambiguity in TBOTNS? Well, for instance, I think, almost certainly, that Master Ash's bleak and scientific outlook depicted part of that ambiguity. Maybe, too, the notion visited in "Sword of the Lictor" that, if the universe had existed for an infinite time, all things, including angels, would have come into existence by logical necessity. And, from my religious perspective, it's hard to imagine a more terrifying story than Melito's story from the "Citadel of the Autarch" of "The Cock, the Angel, and the Eagle", especially as that story was revisited and affirmed as true in "Urth of the New Sun." The point is that within TBOTNS Mr. Wolfe himself generates an alternative religious interpretation of the world in which his story takes place, something that an atheistic would be much more comfortable with than a priest. (Though there's also plenty of room for the priest's interpretation.) To me, this ambiguity is most excellent and makes the work, not only uplifting (as would be a purely religious work), but also subtly frightening.

In Long Sun and Short Sun, I think there's a similar principle and purpose at work (same author, after all). The technique here is to raise a question about the veracity/accuracy of the storyteller. It is thus possible that the story has an entirely naturalistic interpretation, that, for instance, the divine visitations, Silk's goodness, could be written in after the fact. It is again subtly frightening.

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Imperator

----- Original Message -----

From: "Dan'I Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>

To: <whorl at lists1.ba.best.com>

Sent: Sunday, June 10, 2001 5:39 PM

Subject: (whorl) Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible Copyists: a Textual Consideration of the "Book of Silk"

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

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So: paraphrasing Rostrum, can we hope that, though mediated through 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.

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

Jerry Friedman — 13 Jun 2001, 14:59 · follows Steve Strickland

--- Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <ddanehy at siebel.com> wrote:

...

-- presenting to us, in a fictive and cognitively "safe" context, the problem of teasing out the historical facticity that lies behind the Gospels.

I sort of agree. I think Wolfe is clearly inspired by the way the

church receives the Gospels, but I think he's making broader points that have wider applicability than just an apologetic framework for considering the Gospels.

Oddly enough, I wasn't thinking of this project as apologetic. Rather, I was thinking of it as experiential -- taking the experience of having this manuscript, with a certain kind of provenance, and just knowing that, however it may vary from the historical _fact_, it is in essence _true_.

I agree that it has wider applicability than the Gospels; I suspect that this experience has two general applications:

1. A general approach to our reaction to ancient manuscripts -- to our only real source of knowledge of the history of the world before the modernist project of factual accuracy.
2. A general approach to how religious persons approach their sacred texts. It has, as noted, a very strong sense (to me at least) of relation to Luke; but it might be applicable to the Qu'ran or the Rig-Veda or God wot what all; the point being that we have various "scriptures," documents which, to their respective communities of faith, describe the most important events or facts or truths in the world, but which by their very nature _cannot_ be backed up in any factitious way. I could as easily say "Oh -- is _this_ what it's like to believe the Book of Mormon, despite all the evidence against it?": but for all I know, there may be a member of the LDS Church on this list, and the last thing I want to do is give offense.

If I may introduce my non-religious perspective-- people read novels for reasons quite different from those they read the Gospels or Qur'an or Rig-Veda for. In a novel, we look for literary merits such as "fantasy, color, and pathos" (from "The Tale of the Rose and the Nightingale...").

I can enjoy stories in which the fantasy is ambiguous

("Bezhin Meadow" by Turgenev, A Case of Conscience, and I think lots of Lupines would like Nabokov's Pale Fire). But that doesn't work for me in the "Book of the [Foo] Sun", as you called it. If we imagine that Severian was deluded when he had his epiphany on the beach, that the Hierodules were lying to him, that Silk wasn't enlightened, that our narrator couldn't astrally project to other planets, then the stories lose a good deal of fantasy and color with no compensating gain that I can see.

H'mmmm. But then, I think the Gospels are incoherent unless you assume that Jesus was divine.

Here's where I think you're making the connection too closely.

Wolfe may agree with you about the Gospels, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he intends the Long Sun/Short Sun books to be incoherent if you don't believe in the Outsider.

I tend to agree while disagreeing. I believe that he tried to write something that you could do a Crane on -- explain everything away -- but to write it so that these explanations would sound contrived and improbable. I also believe he succeeded at this.

Whether skeptical explanations sound contrived and improbable is important when evaluating putative sacred texts (if that's something one is interested in). In the Long/Short Sun books, I think the important thing is that those explanations are literarily pointless (unlike the ambiguity in A Case of Conscience, which is a large part of the point).

It may be mildly amusing for us readers to note that a fictional reader on New Viron is in much the same position as a reader of the Gospels, but I don't think that means we readers get anything out reacting the same way as someone for whom the truth of the narrative is important.

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Jerry Friedman — 15 Jun 2001, 09:27 · follows Jerry Friedman

--- Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu> wrote:
On Wed, 13 Jun 2001, Jerry Friedman wrote:

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same way as someone for whom the truth of the
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I disagree on two grounds.

1. I think this business of objective vs.
subjective narration is an
important theme of the Long/Short Sun books. Wolfe
is asking us to
examine the assumptions we make when we read a story
in third-person
"omniscient" voice; contrast them with the
assumptions made when told a
story from an individual's limited point of view;
perhaps realize how
unreal and artificial third person/omniscient views
are when they describe
what's going on inside other people's heads. In
real life, we never know
that. We have to take it on faith that inner life
inside other people's
heads even exists; we can never observe it for
ourselves. There's a big
difference between Wolfe telling us Silk thought
such-and-such and Horn
telling us Silk thought such-and-such.

2. Contrary to your opinion, I think this ambiguity
is much more
aesthetically interesting (different tastes, I
guess).

Right--sorry I didn't allow for that in my post.

I thought it was
quite striking that Wolfe seemed to begin the Long
Sun series asking us to
accept the existence of a God who enlightens Silk as
an axiom. Just when
I'd started to take it for granted, Crane invited me
to re-examine it
(even if his explanation turns out not to be very

plausible), which I thought was very interesting. And then Horn shows up and throws the whole thing into question again--it turns out Wolfe himself doesn't ask us to assume the existence of the Outsider for the story, he merely creates characters who believe it. Again, much more interesting.

I've said before, I was quite moved by Silk's inner life, by the prayers he offers, particularly the progression, comparing the long prayers to the Nine he makes in prison with the similar long prayer to the Outsider. So I was shocked when Horn revealed himself and I began to ponder how much of that Horn could really have known, how much was the way Silk wished to present himself to others, how much Horn's wishful thinking. For me, pondering those issues gave me lots to think about after reading the books and upon re-reading them, and I think it makes the series much stronger, deeper, and more interesting.

In a sense, I get to participate in the story. If I believe in Silk's goodness and Silk's god (and I do!--in the context of the story, I mean), it's not just because Wolfe asked me to believe it so that he could tell me a story based on that assumption, but because he created characters who convinced me to believe in them and I've chosen to do so.

Part of the reason for my lack of interest in the reliability of Wolfe's narrators is that this goes back a hundred years, to Henry James (at least). I don't see much difference, for example, between the editorial comments in *TBotsS* and those in *_Ada_*. And speaking of Nabokov, I don't see anything metafictional in any of the *__ Sun* books that compares to *_Pale Fire_*, which I strongly recommend to all Lycophiles who haven't read it.

However, for those of you who like this sort of thing (that means you too, Dan'I)--well, you're probably aware of this but just haven't mentioned it--but I'll remind you that in *_TBotNS_* there's also a fictional Wolfe who translates Severian's manuscript (and has seen some of the era's few extant buildings). That adds yet another layer to the possible unreliability,

as the fictional Wolfe could be either mistranslating (and he comments on the problems he has) or improving the story. Aren't we supposed to imagine something similar in the Whorl books?

Cf., by the way, not only "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story" but also The Lord of the Rings, in which the fictional Tolkien explains some features of his translation. In fact, I find the questions of translation more entertaining than those of reliability. Is the "high tongue" of Viron really Spanish, or some not-yet-existent language that Wolfe chooses to render as Spanish? Why is there a k in "Duko"?

As for your real point--maybe I just missed the shock of Horn's revealing himself and wondering what I was supposed to doubt. But for me, reading a story by Horn isn't *that* different from reading a story by Wolfe.

Jerry Friedman

Jerry Friedman — 18 Jun 2001, 16:16 · follows Jerry Friedman

--- Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <ddanehy at siebel.com> wrote:
Jerry Friedman wrote:

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I must disagree on theoretical grounds. The discourse of
SF uses rhetorical devices -- and the tactics of the

unreliable narrator, the "editorial" comment, and metafictional devices generally are rhetorical devices,
that is, tools in the rhetorical toolchest of the writer
(at least, the writer of narrative) -- in a fundamentally
different way than does the discourse of MF*.

I should probably mention that Ada is alternate-history sf, with a little stefnal fun about the technology of "Anti-Terra". (Pace Nabokov and some Nabokophiles who would undoubtedly say, undoubtedly have said, that Ada is a parody of sf, far superior to [what they think is] the naive and limited genre it parodies, and does something quite different with sf

elements from what [they think] the genre does.)

* MF: A term I've been using for some years, though
I
haven't had much call for it on this group. Just
as
the S in SF may refer to "Science" or
"Speculative"
[or "San" if you live in Northern California], so
the M in MF refers ambiguously/ambivalently to
"mimetic" and "mundane," the latter _not_ intended
as a faanish put-down term but as a descriptive
term
for "stuff that is about the 'real' world."

Or "mainstream"?

[snip stuff that I may ponder more on SF and MF]

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any of the __ Sun books that compares to _Pale
Fire_.

I'm afraid I found it turgid. But I was a lot
younger then; perhaps
I should give it another try.

Perhaps, but I'm not making any guarantees. For those
who haven't read it, I think people who like Wolfe,
especially his, uh, metafictional destabilizations,
are
more likely to like _Pale Fire_ than is the general
literate population. I think it's great.

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but also _The Lord of the Rings_, in which the
fictional
Tolkien explains some features of his translation.

D'oh! And me a Tolkienologist. Well... to tell the
truth, though,
I think Tolkien's intent is exactly opposed to
Wolfe's; Wolfe,
as you note, casts doubt on his "translation" simply
by _making_
it a translation; Tolkien seeks to grant his
subcreation a greater
sense of historicity and "reality" by an apparently
similar (but
functionally quite different) tactic.

"Cf." abbreviates the Latin for "compare and
contrast". :-) I agree with you about Tolkien, but

I'm not sure

I agree about Wolfe. Maybe he was locating _TBotNS_ (et seqq.) in an sf tradition that I don't think began with Tolkien, and providing a socket into which we could plug the bit about sealing the manuscript in a coffer and casting it adrift on the seas of space and time. I was just pointing out that if you like casting doubt on Wolfean narratives, this is another opportunity.

Why is there a k in "Duko"?

Because "Duo" would sound dumb?

hands on hips You know perfectly well what I meant. If those four cities have Italian as their high tongue, why a k and not a c?

Jerry Friedman