

Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible Copyists: a

The Whorl list — 5 messages, 2 voices, 11 Jun 2001

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Michael Straight — 11 Jun 2001, 09:10

On Sun, 10 Jun 2001, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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.

I didn't get into that specifically, but, yes, this is exactly what I had in mind too.

One of my favorite parallels: Luke and Acts are thought to have been written by the same person (arguably, "Luke"). Luke is all third person, and Acts is almost entirely third person until about 2/3 of the way through (in the fourth part if you divided the two books into four parts) the narrator suddenly says, "and then we got ready to leave for Macedonia" (Acts 16:10).

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.

I strongly disagree. Horn believes that Silk was enlightened, and perhaps Silk believed it. But I don't think Silk's story is completely incoherent or unexplainable without it. It's certainly possible Silk simply had some sort of moment of inspiration in which he decided he ought to try to save the manteion (or decided that the Outsider wanted him to save the manteion). People point to Silk having received otherwise unavailable knowledge from his enlightenment, but it's nothing Horn would not have known at the time he wrote the story. It's not like Horn even uses this as "proof" that Silk was enlightened, so it wouldn't necessarily have been bad faith if he just added those parts because he believed Silk must have had some sort of revelation.

Did Jesus really predict the fall of Jerusalem, or is that something the gospel writers added in later?

Now I agree that the most satisfying reading of Silk's story involves trusting Horn and his descendents and accepting Silk's enlightenment, but I still say that Wolfe (1) doesn't cheat by saying "yes, it's true, I know because I'm omniscient" (interviews excluded) and (2) still gives you a good, if more tragic story should you choose to think Silk and Horn were mistaken.

But then I'm the guy who thinks "Westwind" may be a sinister story.

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.

Sure that happens, but I'm not sure that means it's a good idea. I'm not sure, but I have the suspicion that allowing ourselves to really believe in that feeling of having an outside, objective viewpoint is the source of many evils. "Unreliable narrator" may in fact be a meaningless, or at least tautologous concept. Or rather, it's the idea of a completely reliable narrator that is a fallacy.

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.

This is a good point. We're always telling ourselves 3rd-person omniscient stories about the world. Is that a mistake? I don't know.

-Rostrum

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

Michael Straight — 11 Jun 2001, 15:43 · follows Michael Straight

On Mon, 11 Jun 2001, Alex David Groce wrote:

Blish was Catholic? Somehow I'd gotten the impression he was, at some point, an atheist and at another point (I forget the ordering) an Anglican, and that heresies and theology were to a large extent more a hobby to him than a matter of faith. Was I off-base? Google doesn't quickly confirm either hypothesis for me.

You're right. Blish was not Catholic and I don't think he did a very good job capturing Catholic thinking in Case of Conscience. I seem to remember him saying that in the book's universe the Church had only recently accepted Darwinism, when in real life the Church has never really opposed it.

But the real oddity is the book's central dilemma (SPOILERS ahead!). I was completely unable to believe that a Jesuit would assume that because they'd discovered aliens with no discernible knowledge of God or sin, that the whole planet must be an illusion created by Satan. Since when do Catholics believe Satan is capable of such a thing? I think there's some fringe fundamentalists who have suggested the fossil record is some kind of trick by Satan, but Jesuits? And it's extremely anthropocentric to assume that just because we don't understand how this race is related to God they can only be some sort of delusion by Satan to trick us. The whole thing just rang completely false to me.

-Rostrum

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

Michael Straight — 11 Jun 2001, 16:01 · follows Michael Straight

On Mon, 11 Jun 2001, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

One of my favorite parallels: Luke and Acts are thought to have been written by the same person (arguably, "Luke").

Well, either him or another Hellenized Hebrew of the same name ;*)

Inevitably, some scholars suggest there may have been a later writer using Luke's name, but I don't think they make a very good argument.

Now, Wolfe is not writing children's books, but I think it possible and even likely that he is doing something analogous -- 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.

I strongly disagree. Horn believes that Silk was enlightened, and perhaps Silk believed it. But I don't think Silk's story is completely incoherent or unexplainable without it.

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.

Myself, I'd prefer to say that it's very hard to explain why the Gospels were written as they were if you don't believe Jesus was divine. Coherence by itself doesn't mean a whole lot. The Gospels could be coherent in their presentation of a divine Jesus but false.

And the Gospels are more active at debunking rival explanations. They denounce the claim that the disciples stole the body as a story made up by the Jewish Temple establishment. Horn doesn't jump in and proclaim that Crane's hypothesis was nonsense. Horn's not completely convinced himself of the Outsider's existence.

Did Jesus really predict the fall of Jerusalem, or is that something the gospel writers added in later?

That is, of course, precisely the kind of question that the three-layered model I described makes almost unaskable.

N.T. Wright takes a pretty good stab at it in Jesus and the Victory of God. He claims that Jesus could easily have predicted the fall of Jerusalem as an inevitable consequence of continued defiance of the Romans without requiring any sort of foreknowledge of the future.

"Truth is stranger than fiction," said Mark Twain, "because fiction is obliged to make sense." Wolfe is pushing the limit of that obligation, very hard, and I'm not at all certain that he hasn't violated it in SHORT SUN.

Interesting point.

This is a good point. We're always telling ourselves 3rd-person omniscient stories about the world. Is that a mistake? I don't know.

If it is a mistake, it is an unavoidable mistake. We are narrative beings.

But could our narrations be more modest? More aware that they are always from a particular vantage point and not a true objective model of the world?

-Rostrum

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

Adam Stephanides — 13 Jun 2001, 20:16 · follows Michael Straight

on 6/11/01 7:14 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:

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_.

And, clarifying his position later, he wrote:

The issue here is _not_ how a hypothetical Bluish reader might respond when faced with the Books of Silk and Horn; the issue is how _we_ respond when faced with the Books of the Suns of Various Lengths -- [snip]

My point (All together now... "and I do have one") is that the position into which Wolfe places _us_, vis-a-vis the events which hypothetically underlie the LONG/SUN books, is homologous to the position in which an engaged and thoughtful reader, even a skeptical one, finds herself when vis-a-vis the events which hypothetically underlie the Gospels -- "Layer 1 of Gospel formation," to use the RCC terminology: the actual events, _whatever they were_, that occurred in Judaea and the surrounding area ca. 4BC-33AD. (That "fairly unthoughtful" reader, in fact, would be in a position homologous to that of of a "every word of Scripture is literally factual" fundamentalist.)

I don't agree. We "believe" in the accuracy of Horn's account because, as you wrote in an earlier post, it is a literary convention to accept a narrator as truthful and correct unless there is evidence that he/she is lying or misled. And we "believe" in Silk's enlightenment because it makes for a better and more coherent book, in an aesthetic sense (this is not at all the same thing as your argument that the coherence of four separate accounts indicates the historicity of the Gospels). I doubt that either of these is the reason why a believer accepts the truth of the Gospels. And they have nothing to do with my response as an unbeliever to the Gospels. If the "Book of Silk" had somehow actually come to us from the future, but with no further indications as to its provenance, we would have no reason to accept Horn's narrative as true in essence, or Silk as enlightened. If anything, the sophistication with which the book was shaped would tell against taking giving credence to the narrative.

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.

I would hope that historians do not approach ancient manuscripts generally with the same assumptions that we approach the "Book of Silk" or believers approach the Gospels. And it's my impression that the better ones don't. (And there are other sources of knowledge on the ancient world besides manuscripts--archaeology and inscriptions.)

Right. The only problem is that there doesn't seem to be any evidence, outside the one Gospel, that such a story ever circulated. Again: where are the contemporary challenges? For

them all to disappear seems to imply their deliberate suppression, which in turn demands the conspiracy-theory of church formation; but that again seems to founder on the inconsistencies of the texts.

I could say some things in response to this, but I don't think anybody wants a thread going that far afield. I'll just say (since it doesn't directly question anyone's religious belief) that contrary to what you imply above, there was indeed "deliberate suppression" of works regarded as heretical and anti-Christian (see Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*). And, apart from deliberate destruction, the survival of ancient manuscripts was dependent (except for chance archaeological discoveries) largely upon copying by Christian monks and scribes, who would certainly not have copied anything challenging the truth of the Gospels. Several ancient anti-Christian treatises are known only from quotations or discussions by Christian writers who were refuting them; and until the Nag Hammadi discoveries, the same was largely true of our knowledge of Gnosticism.

--Adam

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

Michael Straight — 14 Jun 2001, 09:41 · follows Adam Stephanides

On Wed, 13 Jun 2001, Jerry Friedman wrote:
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.

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). 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.

-Rostrum

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