

Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 1 voices, 11 Jun 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1441>

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James Jordan — 11 Jun 2001, 09:21

At 08:35 PM 6/10/2001 -0500, you wrote:

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.

Imperator

FWIW, this is exactly and precisely what Roman Catholic James Blish does in his classic *A Case of Conscience.* Wolfe shares Blish's Thomism. Blish provides both a "nature" version of the story, and a "grace" version of the story, and only the "eye of faith" can see which version is the more "ultimate" explanation of events. It would not surprise me if Wolfe, who certainly knows Blish's work, would do the same thing.

Nutria

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

James Jordan — 11 Jun 2001, 09:23 · follows James Jordan

I think you're basically right, save that as I wrote in a previous post, I think Wolfe intends the Silk narrative to be a kind of lesser version of the gospels, not equivalent to them.

Nutria

Dan'I wrote in part

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.

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