

Fallible Narrators and Even More Fallible Copyists:

The Whorl list — 6 messages, 1 voices, 11 Jun 2001

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 11 Jun 2001, 09:42

Rostrum, again:

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 ;*)

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).

Luke/Acts is a special problem, imo, in this particular flavor of Scripture scholarship. While the other three Gospels try to give the character of an eyewitness narrative (and "John," in my opinion, actually possesses that character & may well have actually been written or dictated in its earliest form by the John who followed Jesus around), Luke makes no such pretense. Those first four verses I mentioned have a queerly _modernist_ historiographical sense: they are the preface of a historian saying, in effect, "I've done my homework, I've researched, I've gone to original sources and interviewed the remaining witnesses," that sort of thing. This is weird because that sort of historiographical concern doesn't really become common until the Enlightenment or thereabouts; is Luke being defensive, or is he just out of his time, or what? At any rate, it gives me a kind of confidence in the historical facticity of Luke's account that I don't really have for Mt and Mk.

All of which I mention because the first draft of the note I sent off yesterday under this title went into great detail about that subject; it was in fact the launching place for my thesis that Wolfe is recreating the experience of encountering the Gospels, albeit in a fictive context.

May I analogize? _One_ of C.S. Lewis' motivations for writing the "Narnia" books the way he did, was to present some of the ideas of Christianity in a "safe" context -- that is, in a cognitive environment freed of affective authority, with nobody telling you how you "ought" to feel about Jesus and God and all that. By allowing children to respond to these ideas and events in such an environment, Lewis reasoned, he could perform a sort of guerilla evangelism; the responses, once present in the children, might freely associate themselves with their proper objects when those objects were re-cognized.

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.

Given the way the Gospels | Given the way the Books of Silk were written, | and Horn appear to have been written, and the way they have come | and and the way they appear to have down to us, can we believe | come down to us, can we believe that

we know anything about | that we know anything about what what really happened in | "really" happened in the fictive Jerusalem ca. 4BC-33AD? | lives of Silk and Horn?

I wrote:

... to deny Silk's enlightenment is to make the whole LONG SUN (and, by transference, SHORT) fall apart, meaningless and incoherent.

Rostrum responds:

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. I'm not just talking about the infamous "madman, devil, God" trichotomy (which, btw, I think has more force than most people credit); I'm saying that given the different apparent provenances of the four accounts, and especially the radically different provenance and character of John's from the others, I find it extremely unlikely that any coherent explanation of these texts can be produced that does not involve at least some of the miracles, the Last Supper, and the Resurrection actually occurring. I find it equally unlikely, given the nature of the movement, that there are no contemporary accounts of anyone saying "I was there and it didn't happen that way at all" -- the closest things being Josephus, who skirts the issue entirely, and some of the earliest "apocryphal" Gospels, which vary in detail but which actually do support the general outline -- unless there was nobody to say it. (One can conceive of a vast clerical conspiracy to suppress and destroy all such documents, of course, but I'm extremely skeptical of conspiracy theories.)

The point of which is not to try to convert anyone out there, but to give some sense of what kind of response I think the Gospels, and analogously the Books of Silk and Horn, demand.

People point to Silk having received otherwise unavailable knowledge from his enlightenment, but its 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...

... which is another example of the BoS having something of the character of the Gospels. While the evangelists do in fact go out of their way at times to show how Jesus' actions fulfilled this or that prophecy, they don't seem particularly concerned to "prove" that Jesus was the Son of God; they just tell you so and you take it or leave it.

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. Given the nature of Scripture in this understanding -- the written preservation of a community's response to its encounter with the Divine -- the question actually becomes meaningless. Given the model of "inspiration" used in the same school of Scripture study, it simply does not matter whether or not Jesus "actually" said a given thing (that is, whether the statement "Jesus said X" has historical facticity); what matters is that His having said it is preserved for our edification (lit. "building up"). It is perfectly consonant with this model of truth to believe that, on a certain occasion, Jesus said something -- X -- which was ideally suited to the needs of His audience, while the evangelist, years later, wrote down a somewhat different statement, Y, which marks not only the evangelist's imperfect memory, but the movement of the Holy Spirit in the evangelist to set down the statement which would most

generally benefit two thousand years and more of believers and potential believers.

So to ask "Did Jesus really say X"? becomes something rather other than moot -- it becomes an almost Clintonesque inquiry into "well, that depends on what 'really' means."

And, yes, I do think we are operating at that level of uncertainty in dealing with the LONG/SHORT SUN texts; and, no, I am not completely comfortable with that. And so I return to my response to your statement that "[t]here is a sense in which telling a story from a third-person, omniscient viewpoint is cheating." At another level, I want to say that there is a very real sense in which not telling a story from that kind of viewpoint is cheating: it is cheating the reader of a coherent narrative. If I want uncertainty, I'll read fact; when I read fiction, it is usually because I want the pleasure of a coherent narrative.

"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.

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.

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

--Dan'I

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

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 11 Jun 2001, 12:57 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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?

Actually, you were right on target. Blish was an atheist through the fifties -- but one of those atheists who wants to believe, if you know what I mean?

And, like most rationalists with an attraction to religion, he was particularly attracted to the Roman Catholic church and Thomism. His trilogy "After Such Knowledge" (consisting of the historical novel DOCTOR MIRABILIS, the contemporary fantasy BLACK EASTER [its second part, THE DAY AFTER JUDGMENT, should be included here], and the SF novel A CASE OF CONSCIENCE) collectively presume the literal truth of Catholicism at one level or another. The ending of ACOC looks a lot less ambiguous if viewed in the light (or, rather, the darkness) of BLACK EASTER.

After moving to England in the late '60s, Blish was received into the Anglican church. I'm aware of only one bio of Blish, and I read it more than ten years ago; but from what I recall, Anglicanism was a sort of compromise because for some reason (possibly the fact that he was a divorcé?) he could not be accepted into the Catholic church.

--Dan'I

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 11 Jun 2001, 17:14 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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.

Nor do I; but I think even more that it doesn't much matter.

-- 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.

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.

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.

Well, "if you don't believe that the evangelists believed that Jesus was divine." That phrasing leaves separate (as it ought to be) the question of whether they were right about this, and separate from both, the question of the historical facticity of the Gospel accounts. It's when the three questions are laid end to end that I come to my claim that the whole thing becomes coherent only if 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.

I have a great deal of difficulty with this, but only because of the interaction of these three questions. Why would there be a false-but-coherent presentation of a divine Jesus? If it was a deliberate plot to defraud the masses (as some have claimed), I think the plotters would have done a better job of getting their stories straight. Allowing for Luke and John to be later texts by dupes, the inconsistency between MT and MK are enough to cast serious doubt on this; on the other hand, they have exactly the kind of inconsistency that grows in eyewitness accounts handed on orally but carefully. On the other hand, if the evangelists were themselves all deluded (that is, they believed but falsely), a whole set of questions about the lack of contemporary challenge to the core of their claims seems to arise.

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.

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.

Horn doesn't jump in and proclaim that Crane's hypothesis was nonsense.

Right. To do so would be to problematize it; to simply portray Silk's reaction (including his actually considering it as at least a possibility) allows it to reduce itself to absurdity.

Horn's not completely convinced himself of the Outsider's existence.

But this has something of an "I believe; help thou mine unbelief" feel, doesn't it?

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 forkknowledge of the future.

Haven't read this. Probably won't; life's too short.

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?

Subjectivism itself collapses under its own weight (as the question of whether we can ever have access to any certainty drags on and becomes a certainty that there is no certainty), and ultimately becomes the de-valued worldview of postmodernism. I am afraid that I simply reject that worldview as useless for living.

--Dan'l

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

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 13 Jun 2001, 15:32 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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.

While you're right, you are right in a way that, well, sort of misses my point. 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 --

-- specifically, the question "How the hell are we supposed to know what actually *_happened_*?" How are we to make (narrative) sense of this welter of provenances and possible provenances, this scribbling of narrators and editors, interpolators and (maybe) copyists, any one of whom *_may_* be almost-arbitrarily unreliable?

Taking my hypothesis for truth, for the moment: Wolfe is enabled to do this precisely because his texts are located at a peculiar node of the textus of Western culture, a time when the authority of narrativity has been somewhat- successfully challenged by relativistic narrative, unreliable narrators, subjectivism, and postmodernity; but he is writing within a narrower tradition (science fiction) where the objectivity of narrative has remained relatively unchallenged. Using the tools provided by the larger cultural movements, he is writing, for an audience who expects narrative to narrate an objectively-consistent and determinable series of events, in such a way that the series of events may be objectively consistent, but whose objectivity remains beyond the grasp of that audience.

No. Let me take a step back from that position. It is much easier to imagine a reader who accepts the events at their face value, and believes that she has thus grasped the objective flow of events, than it is (for me) to imagine one who believes that Crane's hypothesis is a plausible (plausible from our, outside-the-narrative, hypothetically- objective, standpoint) explanation of Silk's enlightenment.

But I believe that this would be a fairly unthoughtful reader, and not one likely to be a great fan of Wolfe's.

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 a "every word of Scripture is literally factual" fundamentalist.)

I am not, of course, prepared to state that this was Wolfe's intent. I do not claim to know his intent. I am stating that this is an interesting homology, a use to which the Books can be put, if you will; and that I would not be surprised to learn that this was one of Wolfe's reasons for writing them the way he did, rather than some other way. In an ideal world I should like to ask him about it, but this is not an ideal world, and I don't expect the opportunity to arise any time soon.

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 15 Jun 2001, 10:15 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Jerry Friedman wrote:

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.

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*.

* 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."

The writer of MF is ostensibly writing about the world that is the case. (Elided: not only the basic fact that all fiction is about fictive worlds, but the more problematic question of whether any narrative can reasonably be called "non-fiction.") This is true even of the MF writer who wanders into bizarre fantasy -- Kathy Acker, say, or William S. Burroughs. These writers are writing about (their?) subjective experience of the objectively-"real" world; even when they seem to be saying that there is no objective reality, that is still their experience or description of the consensus(?) reality.

The writer of SF, by contrast, is explicitly writing about a fictive world, which exists in a kind of dialogue with the world that is the case. Every detail of the SF writer's fictive world in some way comments-by-contrast upon the "real" world: even the parts that resemble the "real" world, by their presence, announce that (in the mind of this writer) these things remain stable even when these other parts of reality are destabilized. The most explicit statement of this I can think of is the end of Wells' THE TIME MACHINE:

And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white

flowers - shrivelled now, and brown and flat and
brittle - to witness that even when mind and strength
had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still
lived on in the heart of man.

So how do editorial comments, etc., work in SF?

Simply: The discourse of MF creates a fictional series of events among a fictional set of persons set in an ostensibly-real world. A wide range of rhetorical devices add subjective depth to the fictional persons. The particular devices under discussion function in MF to destabilize/cast doubt (primarily) on the events and (secondarily) on the character of the persons.

The discourse of SF creates a fictional series of events among a fictional set of persons set in an explicitly-fictional world. Those rhetorical devices which add subjective depth to MF function primarily to add "objective" depth to the fictional world of the SF text, as do a host of additional rhetorical devices evolved within the sftrdnal tradition. The particular devices under discussion function in SF to destabilize/cast doubt on the discursive reality itself.

More grossly: an MF writer, using metafiction and similar techniques, may be suggesting (for example) that we cannot have any objective knowledge of "reality;" an SF writer, using metafiction and similar techniques, is commenting upon the "real" world by contrasting it with a hypothetical world, but problematizing the contrast by denying us (the sense that we have) any stable knowledge of the hypothetical world.

And speaking of Nabokov, I don't see anything metafictional in
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.

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).

Hadn't mentioned because I hadn't _thought_ about it. You're quite right.

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.

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.

Why is there a k in "Duko"?

Because "Duo" would sound dumb?

--Dan'I

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

And more of Mr Friedman:

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.)

To respond to that I'd have to know (or at least make an educated guess at whether Nabokov himself was familiar with/skilled at the kind of reading SF requires. From what little I know about him I can't begin to make a guess.

I'd be willing to hazard a guess, though, that most Nabokophiles haven't that level of experience/expertise with decoding SF rhetoric.

Regarding my term MF:

Or "mainstream"?

Well, yeah. I used to include that. (And I also used to use the longer term BLMF, for bourgeois literary MF, but I decided a long time ago that the first two terms weren't very interesting to me.) I still do, sometimes, but I no longer believe that the term "mainstream" has much meaning

-- it might be used to describe any of a number of things, including "fiction approved of by literary academics," "fiction that doesn't go into any of the marketing categories like SF and mysteries and, yes, fiction-for-the-literary- academics," "highly-mimetic [i.e., 'realistic'] fiction," or even "bestsellers."

But that there is _a_ _mainstream_ is unlikely, just as there is no longer _a_ _mainstream_ American culture -- if there ever was.

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". :-)

Oh. Actually, that's one I _thought_ I had glerked from context, and so never actually looked it up. Apparently I hadn't glerked it all that well.

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,

Well, JRRT himself wasn't operating in any tradition of the SF/F genre qua genre; I gather that late in his life he read a bit of "that American SF," but don't believe he ever read enough to locate his own

work in any of its "traditions," and certainly not as far back as the '40s.

But, yes, Wolfe himself was certainly operating in the conventions of SF/F. That tBotNS is in part an homage to Vance's "Dying Earth" is just a starting place.

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.

Possibly. I would tend to believe that, yes, that image came before the "apparatus" of tBotNS, and that the apparatus was intended to interact with that image. Someone else pointed out "Wolfe's" claim to have seen some buildings of the post-historic period (what would you call that -- pre-ruins?). I suppose that the existence of this "Wolfe" in tBotNS implies a translating "Wolfe" in the rest of the Lupiverse texts; assuming that Wolfe was consciously aware of this and intended us to be (though, if so, why he didn't make comments about translational difficulties in these texts is a question worth asking), this adds to the levels underlying the "what actually happened?" experience.

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?

I don't think it's Italian, I think it's "Italian," if you see what I mean -- the same way that some of the words of Vironese are Spanish and some are sorta-Spanish-ish? Or, contrariwise, since some of the Vironese words turn out to be South American Spanish, maybe it's some Italian dialect? (Do, or historically did, Sicilians use a different spelling from Romans? Or Tuscans, maybe?)

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