

Fallible Readers and Unreliable History

The Whorl list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 14 Jun 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1445>

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 14 Jun 2001, 11:08

Summary: Anna June gets it, Adam doesn't, and Rostrum...

Quoth Adam:

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).

While I agree provisionally with you so far, I would note that one of the reasons I believe in the Gospels is that such belief, in my opinion, makes for a better and more coherent Universe -- at least, to the extent of my experiencing of it. Consider it a sort of existentialist jiu-jitsu: if I'm as radically free as all that, then I choose to live in a Universe where the Gospels are true, and I find that this converts the nausée of an inherently meaningless existence into joy. Some praise Sartre and Camus and that lot for their courage in resolutely facing the absurdity of life; I sneer at them for their rank silliness in choosing to live life as if it were absurd.

More importantly, though:

I doubt that either of these is the reason why a believer accepts the truth of the Gospels.

Which is why, I'm afraid, you're still talking crossdiagonally to the point I'm actually shooting at.

The question is not why a believer accepts the truth of the Gospels, or why an unbeliever doesn't. That is a fundamental choice. The question is this: no matter what stance one takes vis-a-vis the divinity of Jesus, what access, if any, does an informed and in-formed reading of the Gospels offer us to any actual knowledge of events that went on in and around Jerusalem in the first third-of-a-century AD? This question is actually independent of the question of "belief."

Anna asks roughly the same question in a different way,

How are we, either as unbelievers or believers, to interpret what actually happened when the Bible is insane? No offense meant

And none taken (at least on my part); I agree that trying to make a single linear sense of the Bible is not unlike going to a bookshelf where things have been put more-or-less haphazardly -- say, one of the bookshelves you find in rustic antique stores, covered with books bought at random -- then starting at one end of the shelf, and reading the books straight across -- and trying to read them as if they were a single multi-volume work. You might encounter, in sequence, a condensed Gibbon, the autobiography of Richard Wagner, and the Chemical

Rubber Company Handbook of Chemistry and Physics (34th edition). How do these flow into each other? Yet they are all "nonfiction," all descriptions at some level of the same overarching reality.

Sorry. Got carried away there.

... it is self-contradictory - from Genesis 1 on! This is not questioned by the Catholic Church, either - Catholics are permitted to engage in Biblical criticism.

Two points:

1. The Catholic position is that the Bible is not self-contradictory, if read properly: that is, read as the record of a people's experience of and response to its God, rather than as history, biology, geology, archaeology, cosmology, etc.
2. Catholics are not merely permitted but encouraged to engage in Biblical criticism -- criticism meaning "an informed, intelligent, and questioning encounter with the text." In this way Catholics may expect a better understanding of that experience and response than they might get from a passively literalist reading.

Need I say: I suspect that this is a proper position to take wrt the Whorlbooks? That is:

1. The Whorlbooks are not self-contradictory if read properly: that is, read as a record of Horn's and Silk's (fictional) experiences and their response to those experiences, rather than as biography or history.
2. We, the readers, ought to engage these texts in an informed, intelligent, and questioning way.

As this idea has been evolving in my head, I'm becoming more convinced that the point here is not about what goes on in a writer's head; it's about what goes on in a reader's head. One of the things I've loved about Wolfe since my first encounter with him (tSoT), and I still have my first printing, nyaaaaah) is the very deliberate way he forces the reader to participate in the creation of the story; In the two Whorlish Books, I think, he's taken the next step and made the reader's participation in the story part of how the reader participates in the story -- that is, these Books offer play for a thoughtful reader to think about how she is participating in the creation of the story.

But I still wonder if he's taken all too far...
("...but boy, could he play guitar")

Meanwhile, Adam again:

I'll just say ... that contrary to what you imply above,
there was indeed "deliberate suppression" of works regarded
as heretical and anti-Christian

Ummm... that is not contradictory to what I imply, or at least what I mean to imply (though clearly it is contradictory to what you infer from what I wrote). I do not at all doubt that, after the rise of the Church to political power, there was a deliberate attempt to suppress "heretical and anti-Christian" texts; what I was saying is that I don't think this attempt was quite as successful as you seem to be making out. If such "alternate" accounts had existed, I would expect that traces of them would remain, if only in the form of the "quotations or discussions by Christian writers who were refuting them" you mention with respect to later works.

On to Rostrum:

I think this business of objective vs. subjective narration is an important theme of the Long/Short Sun books.

I'd go further and say it's an important theme of _all_ Wolfe's major work, at least from PEACE on.

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.

Which raises the counter-question: how unreal and artificial does something have to be to be inappropriate to a work of fiction, which describes a universe of discourse which is itself unreal and artificial. (This is only _more_ true of SF/F; it is always true of all fiction -- in which a postmodernist viewpoint would ask us to include all discourse, including the kind we call "non-fiction.")

There's a big difference between Wolfe telling us Silk thought such-and-such and Horn telling us Silk thought such-and-such.

But is there? I wonder if this is one of the assumptions Wolfe is asking us to examine. Given the implied provenance of tBotLS, and ignoring the question of n-generation copyist errors/alterations, we have the Silk and the Horn who appear in the _Books_, and also the Silk and the Horn upon whom the characters in the _Books_ are notionally based. So it would appear that the Silk and Horn who appear in the _Books_ are a sort of second-order fiction, while the Horn and Narr (and kids) who write the _Books_ are the first-order fiction. Except, of course, that this reverses their remove from _our_ reality: we have knowledge only of the "second-order" fictive characters from the _Books_, and can only infer the "first-order" characters; so which is farther removed from "reality"?

In either case: we have Wolfe telling us Silk thought such-and-such, or we have Wolfe telling us that Horn tells us that Silk thought such-and-such; and I am not entirely convinced that the difference is quite as great as it looks at first.

Narrative is not complete until someone reads it. When it is, a real person constructs imaginary events, scenery, persons, etc., in his or her head, on the basis of words on paper. Are the events any more imaginary because the words fictively attribute themselves to a fictional person? In either case, the (provisional) origin of the words is a real person (i.e., Gene Wolfe); the question of our trust in the fictional narrator is far less significant than (and, ultimately, dependent upon) the question of our trust in the real writer.

In a sense, this is the same kind of game Wolfe's texts encourage us to play in stories like "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story" and even _PANDORA, by Holly Hollander_.

I distrust the word "deconstruct," but it seems exactly appropriate: Wolfe is undoing, in various ways, the construction of the received relationships between the reader, the writer, and the narrator (and Wolfe uses a wide array of narrators: the first- person narrator; the first-person narrator whose name is Gene Wolfe; the impersonal third-person narrator; the third-person narrator whose name is Gene Wolfe; the fictional third person narrator...).

Rostrum:

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

...while at the same time, setting up the story so that you can only disbelieve the Outsider's reality (in the Lupiverse) by presuming that Horn/the Narrator writes in extreme bad faith. To be

moved by Silk's inner life, by the prayers he offers,

etc., is to receive a kind of shock when we realize that Horn made it up. But how is this different from Wolfe making it up? Either way, it's a fiction; either way, a writer has told us imaginary events that move us.

Finally, this:

If I believe in Silk's goodness and Silk's god ..., 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.

Or, in writer's-workshop terms (which are actually often very useful from a critical standpoint): Wolfe has come up with an interesting way to put into practice the age-old dictum, "Show, don't tell." By having Horn _tell_ us how he feels about Silk, Wolfe _shows_ us how Silk affects Horn; by receiving this, we feel some sense of Silk's actual goodness.

The question, then, is why some readers find more-or-less the same technic unconvincing when Horn's sons tell us how they feel about the Narrator at the end of _Short_. I suspect this is for a couple of reasons, of which not the least important is sheer metafictional exhaustion. The revelation of Horn as the narrator of _Long_ comes at the end of a long story which has (mostly) been free of overt metafictional content; the Editors' comments at the end of _Short_ follow three volumes of overt metafictional tactics.

--Dan'l

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

Jerry Friedman — 18 Jun 2001, 16:00 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

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

...

The question is not why a believer accepts the truth of the Gospels, or why an unbeliever doesn't. That is a fundamental choice. The question is this: no matter what stance one takes vis-a-vis the divinity of Jesus, what access, if any, does an informed and in-formed reading of the Gospels offer us to any actual knowledge of events that went on in and around Jerusalem in the first third-of-a-century AD? This question is actually independent of the question of "belief."

...

Yahoo's otherwise excellent e-mail truncates long messages, so I can't combine this with your comments about it not mattering so much whether Silk is a character in Horn's story or Wolfe's (or I'm not willing to do the cutting and pasting). But I agree with you about it not mattering that much--and I had already read that comment when I said much the same to Rostrum.

Here's the difference between reading the Whorl books and reading the Gospels, imo. If you could learn the reality behind the Gospel narratives, you'd have the answer to a question that's been crucially (pun not intended but noticed) important to billions of people. On the other hand, if you could learn the fictional reality behind the Whorl books, all you'd have is another story.

Jerry Friedman

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 18 Jun 2001, 16:46 · follows Jerry Friedman

Jerry Friedman, you wrote:

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Well ... yeah. That's the point, innit?

What I've been trying to convey: I "think" Wolfe's text offers a (willing) reader some sense of the experience of trying to get at the "reality" behind an ancient text, with multiple authors, questionable provenance, and no guarantee that N generations of copyists have managed the degree of accuracy we'd like, -- in short, an experience roughly analogous to trying to determine the historical "facts" behind the Gospels -- in a context that feels "safe" because, after all, "it's just a story;" and that it does this without respect to (a) the story Wolfe has chosen to tell, (b) Wolfe's intentions in telling that particular story, and (c) whether or not Wolfe actually intended the text to offer such an experience-by-analogy.

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Michael Straight — 26 Jun 2001, 14:02 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Thu, 14 Jun 2001, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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But is there? [...]

In either case: we have Wolfe telling us Silk thought such-and-such, or we have Wolfe telling us that Horn tells us that Silk thought such-and-such; and I am not entirely convinced that the difference

is quite as great as it looks at first.

I think of it this way. Imagine reading a story in which spaceships can use a certain doohicky to move faster than light (not hyperspace, but actually moving faster than light). Now I might believe that such a doohicky is impossible, yet accept it as the author's premise and see if she writes an interesting story around it. Now imagine that part way through the book, the author gives you reason to believe the spaceships aren't going faster than light after all, that the characters only think they're going faster. The whole story changes from one where FTL is accepted as a given to one where the possibility of FTL is part of what the story is about.

Put another way, when we read Tolkien, we don't get into a tizzy about whether Morgoth and Sauron and other such supernatural creatures really exist. We just accept them as a given, as part of Tolkien's imaginary universe. Wolfe doesn't want us to think of the Outsider like that.

I think this is related to Wolfe's writing technique in the New Sun books. I've argued elsewhere that Wolfe baits us by making the series look superficially like fantasy, but gradually luring us into reading it as science fiction, with "scientific" explanations for the various marvels. So then, when he throws in some genuine miracles, they are genuinely startling in the way that a miracle would be in the real world. We don't just think, "oh this is a fantasy universe where magic healing exists."

For Wolfe to tell us in third-person omniscient mode that Silk was enlightened would make the enlightenment an objective fact of the Lupiverse. For Horn to tell us about it makes it a subjective belief of one or more inhabitants of the Lupiverse.

...while at the same time, setting up the story so that you can only disbelieve the Outsider's reality (in the Lupiverse) by presuming that Horn/the Narrator writes in extreme bad faith. To be

No, if the Outsider is all in Silk's head, then Horn isn't lying to us; he's just mistaken. The bits of "foreknowledge" that he writes into the book would simply be Horn's mistaken notion of what the Outsider had revealed to Silk.

moved by Silk's inner life, by the prayers he offers,

etc., is to receive a kind of shock when we realize that Horn made it up. But how is this different from Wolfe making it up? Either way, it's a fiction; either way, a writer has told us imaginary events that move us.

It makes a difference because I thought I was reading a story about Silk's faith in the Outsider, but then it turns out I'm really reading a story about Horn's faith in Silk. Horn believes that Silk was enlightened, that he was a good man, that he would have prayed this way in those circumstances. So not only do we get the story Horn tells us, but we, by implication get to ponder the story of how Horn came to believe these things, and whether he was right.

Either way, those beautiful prayers are no longer simply Silk's private, inner life. Either Horn made them up, which makes them part of Horn's story--how he came to acquire such depth--or Silk taught them to Horn, which means the prayers are part of Silk and Horn's relationship, not just Silk's relationship with the Outsider.

Or, in writer's-workshop terms (which are actually often very useful from a critical standpoint): Wolfe has come up with an interesting way to put into practice the age-old dictum, "Show, don't tell." By having Horn tell us how he feels about Silk, Wolfe shows us how Silk affects Horn; by receiving this, we feel some sense of Silk's actual goodness.

The question, then, is why some readers find more-or-less the same technic unconvincing when Horn's sons tell us how they feel about the Narrator at the end of _Short_

The difference is that Horn does more showing and Horn's sons are just telling. Horn doesn't give us this big dissertation on how genuinely good Silk is, he mostly just tells stories about what he thinks Silk said and did. When I got to that passage at the end, I was surprised, I wondered what exactly made Hoof(Hide?) feel that Silk was so good, and why it scared people. I'd had a sense of Silk's goodness from Horn's stories, but Hoof/Hide didn't give me a real sense of what it was like to be around someone so good it was scary, they just told me as a statement.

-Rostrum

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