

A defense of the Long Sun's style/plot

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 01 Apr 2000

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Patri10629 — 01 Apr 2000, 23:29

In a message dated 4/1/00 4:27:08 PM, akt at attglobal.net writes:

<<

Bjpp2 then wrote, responding to Timothy Reilly:

I still think Long Sun is very disappointing. The third person style of > diction chosen is flat and to my mind rather boring, anaesthetising > Wolfe's linguistic genius (so on display in OBW and TBNS). The ideas, > while interesting, did not require four volumes to present. As for the > meticulous plotting suggested by Alice Turner, I can only say this was > not evident to me - on the contrary I had the impression that unlike > TBNS the series was not fully written in advance, if only because Exodus > is twice as long as the three preceding volumes.>>

Two things:

In terms of plotting: I, too, had difficulties with the Talus factory scene. But bear with me and check this out.

Early in NIGHTSIDE... Silk has cracked the book at random and is interpreting two passages from Chrasologic Writings for the children in the church. They have to do with birds. This is right before Oreb's botched sacrifice and right after his purchase. Notice how Wolfe's draws our attention to that fact, even though he is not talking about Oreb at all.

P. 49, NLS "...when the actors and actresses have washed away their makeup and changed back into the clothing they ordinarily wear..."

And then...

P. 49-50 NLS "It will not help us as the foreknowing authors point out in the next line, to daub a raven, smearing a blackbird with the delicate beauties of the lark or the decent brown of the bulbul. Not enough, even, to gild it like the goldfinch. It is still a raven..."

And then...

P. 50 (IBID) "Suppose, for example, that some uneducated man...were by chance thrust into the office of His Cognizance, the Polocutor. You would eat and sleep in his cognizance's big palace on the Palatine. You would hold the baculus and wear the jeweled robes, and all the rest of us would kneel for your blessing. But you could not provide us with the wisdom that it would be your duty to supply. You would be a croaking raven daubed with paint, with gaudy colors."

He is talking about Questzal. A figure who will not be revealed until 600 some pages later. In the opening chapter of Calde of The Long Sun where he dabs on his makeup and flies away.

You do not get things like this in dashed-off first drafts. This is the mind of an master builder or an engineer--"a foreknowing author" as he slyly and self-consciously admits in the text--laying

foundations that will not evidently bear weight until much later. And, still, this foreshadowing of the impersonating inhuman is only one level of what Wolfe is doing in these early, seemingly innocent passages.

In terms of style: This is his method throughout the Long Sun Books. Deception. Thusly the prose reflects the major themes and thrust of the novels: Cutting through the crap to understand the mysterious revelation of an unknowable true god as well as the underlying conspiracies and stratagems of mortals and false gods. Deceptively transparent prose which is so clear and narratively propulsive it seems to be what it appears to be. It is not. It is some of the densest, metaphor-laden and trickiest prose I have ever read. And it is beautiful on any level, in my opinion. Try reading any passage aloud and marvel at the music.

For further proof: Re-read the very first two pages of NIGHTSIDE--so simple, so plain--read right to the first line of dialogue "I will not fail." Try decoding just how many motifs are buried there. In many ways, Wolfe has given the shape and structure of the whole saga. He even mentions Blue and Green. Talk about foreshadowing!

Most of this stuff I didn't get until my third read. I'm on my fifth now and I'm still discovering, still captivated. Severian's beautiful grave poetry was a different kettle of fish. This is airier stuff, wind-made, bird currents, but just as strong--and like the wind, you can only see it when it interacts with something that crosses its path. Indirectly, that is.

Hope this helps.

Patrick O'Leary

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