

groping in the dark

The Whorl list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 11 Feb 1997

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CoxRathvon — 11 Feb 1997, 14:04

In response to Dave Lebling's comments (about Silk sometimes being mistaken), Jim Jordan wrote: "In both the Severian Quintet and in the Long Sun Quartet Wolfe gives us a central character who is slowly working his way out of a bad beginning. In Silk's case, it is idolatry. Slowly he comes to understand that the Outsider is the only real God, and all the rest are false. After that, he comes to appreciate that even these false gods carry fragments of truth with them. Idolatry is a major interest in many of Wolfe's works, but never more than here. Silk's gradual understanding of the Outsider's command to him is part of that process of illumination and deliverance from bondage."

I quite agree with all of that, and at the risk of overdoing the analysis (but hey, what's this forum for?) I'd like to add that Wolfe has always seemed to me to be interested in the limits of knowledge. Many of his characters begin in darkness and work their way toward some (often ambiguous) assurances. Consider: the kid in "Devil in a Forest" who is locked in a dark cellar hearing the story move forward without him; the soldier Latro in his "mist" of amnesia; the mental patient Green who steps through a door into a parallel world; Severian who grew up in a sheltered guild; the characters in "The Fifth Head of Cerberus," all unable to find self-knowledge; etc.

This theme has always intrigued me; in fact it's a major reason why I read Wolfe. Vladimir Nabokov has a novel ("Invitation to a Beheading") in which a condemned man is imprisoned in a high turret with a single narrow window; Nabokov later confided that this tower was a metaphor for the human head, which swivels helplessly as it contemplates the universe through a severely limited door of perception. In many of Wolfe's books, I find a similar metaphor: knowledge being a thin splinter of light which the main character pursues in a huge, dark world. What we can know is always so minuscule in the face of what we can't know!

Anyhow it's no wonder Wolfe's characters are often mistaken as they grope their way. As if in compensation, Wolfe sometimes gives them gifts: Latro's ability to see the gods, Severian's memory, Silk's vision and/or imputed program.

Having dispensed with this heavy-osity, I welcome additional mentions of Silk's being mistaken. It's useful to compare his misunderstandings to our own!

--Henry Rathvon

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m.driussi — 13 Feb 1997, 15:26 · follows CoxRathvon

Henry Rathvon,

Re: the limits of knowledge explored in Wolfe's work, I agree with you most emphatically. There is also the "Roshamon" quality of multiple versions of events, often, as in "Roshamon," events

which the reader does not get to see firsthand.

(In LONG SUN this includes: Orpine's murder, Rose's death, the departure of the first lander, etc.)

Sometimes this takes the ghost story angle--yes, there is a "rational" explanation (that branch could tap the window; that sorcerer in the Soldier books was only pretending to be a woman--or a woman pretending to be a man) as well as a "supernatural" explanation (the dog's hair turned white; that sorcerer really does seem to have been physically transformed). The two explanations wrestle or chase each other around the reader's mind until they (or the mind?) turn into butter.

=mantis=

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CoxRathvon — 13 Feb 1997, 12:48 · follows m.driussi

M.driussi at genie.com (mantis) has assured me that I'm not the only reader intrigued by the reality-probing nature of Wolfe's books. I must say, I think this aspect of Wolfe's work is underestimated. I don't read much literary criticism so maybe I'm mistaken and Wolfe does have respect among "mainstream" (God, I hate to make that distinction) critics. Unabashedly, I rank Wolfe with my other favorite writers, who include Nabokov, Borges, Calvino, Beckett, and Donald Barthelme--many of whom are called "post-modernists" or "metafiction" practitioners. In any case, they all share this quality of rendering reality ambiguous. (I appreciate mantis's reference to "Roshamon"--I see the similarity and I hadn't thought of that before.)

I happen to love the ambiguity, perhaps because my world view (I should say, my cosmic view) includes so many uncertainties. But I don't often succeed in making a Wolfe convert. The few times I've tried, people have read about 1/3 of a book and then quit, saying, "It's so confusing, I don't understand it." I think the average reader will have more success with the Long Sun series, because the first book begins comparatively (for Wolfe) coherently: Silk's long, slow advance on Blood's villa is described in careful detail and is very absorbing in a conventional way.

But I digress. I was saying that I think Wolfe is critically underappreciated. His carefully puzzled-out plots, his misdirection and ambiguity, are to me as interesting and literarily remarkable as the techniques in Nabokov, Calvino and others. See, I don't even think of Wolfe as an sf writer. I think of him as a modern stylist with his own very interesting narrative tricks. I'm often puzzled by elements of his stories (and this forum is helping me a lot with the recent series), but I enjoy the puzzlement. It reflects life's essentially enigmatic nature. My life's, anyhow.

--HR

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