

The Anatomy of Melancholy

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 31 Aug 2000

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Alex David Groce — 31 Aug 2000, 13:28

To speak very broadly indeed, which I think is sometimes necessary with Wolfe, it does strike me that the tonus (as distinguished from the intellectual doctrinal structuring) of Wolfe's major works is anything but Christian. Except maybe in certain parts of the book we are now considering, the melacholia is profound: *_In Blue's Waters_*, and many of the later stories, are acts of heroism (it seems) against a very deep sadness, which Christians (and others) might put a term to. I myself would tend to cod gnosticism here: it feels like the occlusion or bondage of the blinding world, to me.

There are certainly some gnostic-seeming elements, but I think the key may be to realize that Wolfe (even more than, say, Flannery O'Connor, who was often seen as writing despairing or fundamentally pessimistic fiction despite her claims otherwise) is artistically interested in Christ-crucified more than Christ-triumphant, even in the moments of revelation and transcendence (as at the end of *URTH*) in his work. Rereading "The Death of Doctor Island" brought this point home. Wolfe loves Chesterton but really there is a huge difference in their artistic attitudes to Christianity: Chesterton can't bear to damn a character, even if it (possibly) hurts the work to avoid it (*THE BALL AND THE CROSS*, for example) while Wolfe emphasizes, especially in his short fiction, the extreme -jeopardy- of creatures with free will. The deep sadness in Wolfe's work is a result of this, and while it is doctrinally bounded, that bound is probably beyond fictional exploration, as being beyond time. Wolfe's work is time-haunted in the extreme--especially with Severian there is an equation between approaching divinity and stopping time (and raising the dead); but that approach is asymptotic within the fiction's scope.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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