The Rhetoric of an Impossible Object: Gods, Chems, and Science Fantasy in Gene Wolfe's *Book of the Long Sun*

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■ Robert Scholes has called science fantasy an "oxymoronic monster" (4)—as he has said of a blurb about a previous tetralogy of Wolfe's, "Science fiction is described as hard and sharp—in contrast with the soft and shapeless lyric extravagance of fantasy. Science fantasy, is then, by definition an impossible object, hard and soft, pointed and uncircumscribed: a monstrosity" (5). But by the end of the essay Scholes concedes that the "oxymoronic structure" of science fantasy "does convey something important about this new and extremely interesting fictional development" (18). Just how interesting, we can see in Wolfe's latest tetralogy, the *Book of the Long Sun*.

It's easy enough to define the individual components of this mixed genre: as one commentator on speculative fiction has fancifully noted, "spaceships, robots, or rivets mean science fiction; a quaint village, an old man with a very long white beard, or a sword held by a mostly naked person mean fantasy" (McClintock 26). Wolfe's own definition of the components is handy, too: "Science fiction is what you can make people believe; fantasy is what people have to suspend disbelief for" (Baber 1). But how then, as Scholes has pointed out, can something be both science and fantasy? In an excellent essay on science fantasy, Brian Attebery sidesteps the problem by concentrating on what the authors actually do. He notes that the genre tends to be very ad hoc—writers, as Roger Zelazny also argues in an article in *Intersections,* mix and match the science and the fantasy freely according to need. Furthermore, the writer may willfully ignore

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any specific considerations of genre. As Wolfe himself has said, "I'm not trying to write genres, I'm trying to write a book" (Baber 3).

Critics of course enjoy occupying themselves with what fiction writers prefer to do intuitively. Critics such as Gary Wolfe and John Clute treat science fantasy as a branch of fantasy—specifically, they would probably consider *The Long Sun* a "rationalized fantasy." In Gary Wolfe's terms, science fantasy "refers to a genre in which devices of fantasy are employed in a 'science-fictional' context" (107); the Clute/Grant *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* contends science fantasy invokes "historical or scientific explanations for happenings that seem magical." Perhaps most significantly the *Encyclopedia* does not list science fantasy as one of the terms within the umbrella category, the FANTASTIC (which includes FANTASY, SCIENCE FICTION, MAGIC REALISM, FABULATION, and SURREALISM).[1] I believe that the *Encyclopedia*'s omission is appropriate because science fantasy isn't truly a subgenre but instead is an inherently unstable isotope whose slow decay produces the special effect that makes it distinctive.

Science fantasy, in other words, is inherently unstable; based on the clues given in the individual work, the reader is likely to subsume the fantasy into the science, or the science into the fantasy. In the case of the *Long Sun,* readers are at the beginning most likely to explain the fantasy in terms of science, but they will ultimately be unable to do so completely, and that inability will produce some of the book's most memorable effects. The instability of the mixture, I will argue, is essential for the effects this strange compound produces.

The problem of mixed genres immediately affects the reader's attempt to understand a novel's setting. The question of how to interpret the setting is basic to reading any fiction, and particularly important in fantasy, science fiction, or the blend of the two. Starting *Nightside the Long Sun,* the first volume of the series, a reader attentive to Wolfe's title might look for references to the sun as clues to the nature of this fictional world, and at first the evidence is ambiguous. One phrase notes that "sun's golden road across the sky was markedly narrower already" (1:23).[2] Does the sun create an imaginary golden road in its path, as our sun does, or is the sun constantly a golden road—a long sun? Terms like "shadeup" and "shadedown" are different, too. Are they just terms different from our "sunrise" and "sunset," or signals that the sun's not like ours?

The reader will be probing a good deal more than the image of the sun. From the first chapter of *Nightside* we know we're confronting a world of contradictions: "A black civilian floater was roaring down Sun Street, scattering men and women on foot and dodging ramshackle carts and patient gray donkeys, its blowers raising a choking cloud of hot yellow dust" (1:17). In addition to the contrast of the high-tech floaters and the no-tech donkeys of that passage, the reader will discover augurs sacrificing animals to gods who seem something from the Greco-Roman pantheon (later on one of the gods, not one of the original nine, will be named Kypris, an appellation associated with Aphrodite). Words

we're familiar with are applied in unusual, usually comical ways. "Mainframe" seems to be the place you go when you die—this mythological world of fantasy is strangely technological. The gods once appeared on Sacred Windows in the manteions (the places of worship), and sacred cables run from these windows. The gods depend, we suspect, on rather ancient technology—cathode ray terminals that can be wheeled into the street, though it takes a dozen men to do so (3:112)—really Big Screen T.V. in service of a national religion.

Most readers will resolve the instability of science and fantasy by developing a rational explanation, first by hypothesizing that this "whorl," as it's called, with its cities visible above in the night sky, is some sort of space ark (generation starship) illuminated with the futuristic equivalent of a huge fluorescent light bulb. The reader in effect subsumes the fantasy into a science fiction configuration. By the time the reader learns in *Exodus from the Long Sun* that the whorl was dug out from a "big hunk of rock" (4:155) the reader is likely to have surmised that this space ark is perhaps a hollowed-out asteroid, given a spin, a "whorl," to create the appropriate level of gravity, after the fashion of the spinning torus colonies that have proliferated as a trope in science fiction. Furthermore, readers are likely to continue this assimilation by positing the gods as humanly controlled myth—after all, Enlightenment thinkers and Marxists long ago told us that religion is used to manipulate the masses. These gods seem to be human attempts to solidify through ideology, as contemporary thinkers would tell us, the prevailing power structure, which is controlled in this tetralogy by "Mainframe." If the technological explanation were fully satisfying, *The Long Sun* would be a "rationalized fantasy."

My brief account of how a reader might analyze this opposition of science fiction and fantasy, however, necessarily distorts the actual experience of reading the four volumes that constitute *The Book of the Long Sun*. Although questions about this world this may predominate early, clues are so sparse the reader will focus elsewhere. Most of us focus on the plot, as we follow the protagonist, Patera Silk, in his quest to respond to the initial charge of a different god, the Outsider, not one among the nine. As instructed by the Outsider, Silk strives to save his manteion, located in a poor neighborhood, and it is at risk of being sold. Furthermore, the world we're immersed in is one we begin to inhabit much as the characters do. This world is dense and intricate, rich in detail, with recurring street names, new weapons—a needler, for instance, the equivalent of a .22 pistol. For the characters this whorl is the only world they know. The reader's angle is only slightly different, and only occasionally is a clue given to invoke again the issue of who the gods are or where this world is. Surely, most readers would assume, we will eventually find out who's manipulating these gods, these T.V. screens, and for what purpose, and the assumption that such gods will be rationally explained is likely to persist through all four volumes. Ultimately, however, Wolfe uses the instability of science fantasy as a genre for unique

twists. We could see how by analyzing a number of different strands, but I will focus first on the gods themselves and then on taluses and chems—mechanical people—to observe how science fantasy works.

The gods of this book, creatures of the fantasy half of the genre, have a certain power and authority. We can "believe" in them. They have not appeared for over thirty years, but they are beginning to appear again—twelve theophanies on sacred windows over the four volumes of the *Long Sun,* in addition to seven possessions (Turner, internet). The theophanies have a certain majesty, given the swirling hues that announce them on the sacred windows and the magical conditions under which the gods can be heard—only those without sexual relations, with a few exceptions, can understand the message—hence a celibate clergy is needed to interpret what others can see and only partially hear. Generally in the course of the theophanies those rules seem to hold, and the condition of celibacy itself hardly seems something accessible to technological manipulation. And the gods deliver traditional messages—Echidna appears to demand that the city of Viron return to worship of her daughter, Scylla, who in turn appears to demand the overthrow of the current rulers of the Ayuntamiento (the ruling body of the city) and the restoration the city's charter, as well as the release of prisoners. A god insisting on her power and rights, her tradition and appropriate worship, matches the way we expect gods, including the God of the Old Testament, to behave.

Scenes in which a god appears are strong scenes, climactic scenes, and their strength and violence are not easily explained away. Maytera Marble, seemingly possessed by Echidna, interrupts Musk's assassination plot at a ceremony and holds him at the flaming altar, burning him as a sacrifice, as Echnidna's familiars—vipers—appear. As elements of fantasy and myth reenacted, theophanies are powerful experiences. Curiously enough, Wolfe has even argued in an interview that "the gods of paganism were real," meaning that they were real powers, but not worthy of worship—one instance where Wolfe, a Catholic, confessed he "split off from conventional Catholic thinking" (Jordan 10).

Strong, however, as these fantasy elements are, the gods are clearly computer beings. The goddess Kypris, possessing the human character Chenille, uses terms like "copy" and "erase" to explain how parts of the gods can be put in people, all under the control of the gods at Mainframe (3:107–9). And these are gods that can die. As Chenille (then possessed by Scylla) reveals, the god Pas, the father of the gods, has long been dead: "We wiped him out of core thirty years ago" (2:262). As another god, Tartaros, explains to Auk in the tunnel, "The faces we had as mortals have rotted to dust, and the voices we once possessed have been still for a thousand years. No augur, no sibyl in the Whorl, has ever seen or heard them. What your augurs and sibyls see, if they see anything, is the self-image of the god who chooses to be seen" (3:231).

These gods are representations of a human family, and very much a family of squabblers. Kypris, who is not one of the daughters of Pas, but rather his lover,

is particularly jealous of the rest, commenting on "homely little Scylla, with her father's temperament and her mother's intellect" and on Pas, who wanted to wipe Echidna out of core (4:189–90) once he felt she would try the same on him.

What Wolfe can do with the ambiguity of the gods, what kind of storytelling energy he can derive from that, we can best see in one particular theophany. At one point the goddess Scylla has possessed Chenille—a large raspberry-haired tart from Orchid's brothel—who maintains her normal appearance, which in her case is naked (satisfying one of McClintock's descriptors for fantasy!), while the group remains on a journey. The "Daddy" the goddess speaking through Chenille refers to in what follows is Pas, the father of the gods. As the group passes

> glowing windows of cookshops and taverns . . . late diners bound for rented beds stared rudely at Chenille's nakedness, or resolutely did not stare. "Six children after me! Daddy had this thing about a male heir, and this other thing about not dying." A drunken carter tried to tweak her nipple; she gouged his eyes with both thumbs and left him keening in the gutter. "Molpe was just another girl, but you would have thought Tartaros would do it. Oh, no. So along came little Hierax, but even Hierax wasn't enough. So then three more girls, and after that—I suppose you already knew we could take you over like this?" (2:261–62)

Patera Silk, whom Chenille/Scylla is addressing, does not question whether the Chenille he knows could be possessed; his concerns about the nature of his world are not those of the reader. He does not, as does the drunken carter, try to take advantage of the opportunity of Chenille's nakedness; instead he accepts the concept of a god talking to him, because he has been raised to know the world as one that these gods rule. If we are inclined to look down on Silk because he's hoodwinked by these "gods," we are also likely to look up to him as considerably more noble than the drunken carter. The reader is constantly tricked into accepting Silk's position, believing these things are "actually happening," because that's how everyone within the novel sees them. Yet at another level the reader's response is tinged with the humor of knowing that a theophany such as this cannot be exactly as Silk sees it. In that sense the continual instability of the genre, our continuing tendency to be pulled in imaginatively to something we rationally know can't be so, is interesting to the reader scene by scene, moment by moment. In terms of the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy,* then, science fantasy does what's central to all forms of fantasy—it modifies our PERCEPTION.

At the same time readers may enjoy local effects, larger questions remain. We would most clearly be able to confirm the assumption that through science, human manipulation and not the "real gods" of fantasy rule, if we could understand how the inhabitants are being led into an Exodus, and where they are going, in the final volume. We know that Pas, or something manipulating his image, even though it has supposedly been erased, is guiding the Exodus; but only a few inhabitants escape at the end, and more questions emerge—is Patera Quetzal, who seems to be gaining influence, in fact an inhumi, a vampire-like

fantasy creature from of a type imagined in other fictions by Wolfe, and can he control the Exodus? Or is Typhon, a godlike character from the previous tetralogy, *The Book of the New Sun,* the reality behind Pas? Ultimately Wolfe seems to be locating the whorl not in our world but in his previous fictions, endlessly deferring the questions of what is figure, what is ground, what is science, and what is fantasy.

Even more significantly, the motif of the Outsider, present but submerged from the beginning, ultimately destabilizes even the assumption that we can locate the whorl within Wolfe's previous fiction or that science can be used to ground our conception of the whorl. Initially the Outsider is a very minor presence, appearing only three times, none on sacred windows. How this god relates to Pas and the others is a continual problem for Silk. He knows of selected references to the Outsider in the Chrasmologic Writings, which are treated as a kind of sacred scripture. But this god, the one who appeard to Silk as he played ball on a court with his pupils, the god who had "always been behind [Silk] and standing (as it were) at both his shoulders had, after so many years of pregnant silence, begun to whisper into both his ears," this god who, after he is known, "nothing could ever be the same," is a driving force for Silk, a force that will make him question what kind of world he does live in (1:9).

An entirely rational, scientific explanation of Silk's perception of the Outsider is offered—Dr. Crane discounts the experience, in a sense repeating the original tendency of the reader to imagine fantasy in the context of science: "'You had a cerebral accident, that's all. Most likely a tiny vein burst as a result of your exertions during the game. When that happens in the right spot, delusions like yours aren't at all uncommon. Wernicke's area, it's called.' He touched his own head to indicate the place" (2:280). The text encourages the reader to develop hypotheses about who the Outsider is from minimal clues, going beyond Dr. Crane's skepticism. The Outsider, we learn, made men and women of mud "according to one somewhat doubtful passage in the Writings" (2:101). In another passage Silk further explains the vision the Outsider first gave him on the ball court: "There was a naked criminal on a scaffold, and we came back to that when he died, and again when his body was taken down. His mother was watching with a group of his friends, and when someone said he had incited sedition, she said that she didn't think he had ever been really bad, and that she would always love him" (2:273). What Silk is hearing is scripture from our world, skewed. We recognize Mary's response to the crucifixion, Mary who like any loving mother of a son accused of crime, believes He wasn't a bad boy after all.

One way to understand the Outsider is to focus on the effect he has on Silk. The Outsider does not possess Patera Silk as Kypris possesses Chenille; the Outsider enlightens Silk. And it is this enlightened Silk who shows patience and understanding to the frightful yet piteous Mucor, the girl at times chained by her father, Blood, to control her eerie power of possession of others that seems to have none of the copy/erase technology associated with Pas or the other gods.

It is due to the Outsider that Silk, in dealing with the Ayuntamiento, surrenders in order to achieve peace, in Christ-like manner overcoming opposition by renunciation. Ironically his moral behavior has grown from the obedience required of augurs in the Chrasmologic writings, obedience that is possibly a form of manipulation; but Patera Silk can apply that morality beyond anything "Mainframe" might dictate. He is far beyond manipulative augury and beyond the cynicism of such as Quetzal, who knows Pas is dead—the priest who knows God is Dead theology—but who conceals that knowledge merely to keep the morals of the inhabitants of the whorl in place.

At the same time the Outsider is gradually revealing himself to Silk, Wolfe gradually reveals the Outsider to the reader. Crane once refers to the Outsider as a "minor god" (2:275), but perhaps the most delicious irony of all is in the preface, entitled "God, Persons, and Animals Mentioned in the Text," placed before volume 2, where the Outsider is described as "the minor God who enlightened Silk"; subsequent volumes offer a truer picture—in the preface to volume 3 the Outsider becomes "the god of the broken and the disparaged whose realm lies outside the Whorl," and by volume 4, simply and most accurately "the god of gods."

The ultimate instability, the ultimate shift in figure-ground relationships, turns out not to be between science fiction and fantasy at all but between fiction and theology. That shift is not a necessary product of science fantasy—science fantasy need not devolve into metafiction or theology. But the fluidity of boundaries of interpretation and the need for reversal due to the instability of science fantasy easily allows Wolfe his major surprise: the Outsider is the God of our world. Readers, instead of finding themselves coping with the impossible object of a mixed genre, are coping with the longstanding and equally impossible hypothesis of the dual nature of our earthly world, the creation of a God who has given us not only the Chrasmologic Writings but the Bible as well. He who built the Long Sun also built our world.

The *Book of the Long Sun* is a rich, multi-stranded work, and the theme of the gods/Outsider, significant as it is, is but one of many. Wherever we look, the issue of whether science and fantasy can co-exist ultimately dissolves into merry ironies and beyond them into the context of our very familiar cultural concerns. Chems, for instance, provide many such rich ironies. Chems such as taluses, huge ones that can serve as soldiers or security staffs and that can hold perfectly plausible conversations with humans (or biochemicals, as humans are known in the *Long Sun*), provide satire on human labor contracts; their presence in a high-tech world also offers Wolfe a chance for an extended leg-puller on readers too eager to find fully scientific explanations. One reads attentively to follow how taluses are constructed, but they seem like the products of a nineteenth-century foundry, not a silicon culture. Their heads are made of brass, explains Swallow, a talus salesman: "A talus's head requires some pretty complicated castings, and brass is easier to cast than iron, so we use that for the head" (4:134).

Chems that seem more human, like the Mayteras, in effect nuns that assist the Pateras in teaching schools, are evidently capable of some kind of reproduction and can cannibalize each other for parts. The biggest stretcher is that chems can reproduce. They in fact have not, but they were programmed to do so. As Hammerstone, a soldier chem explains to Silk, "Each of us is hardwired with half the plans. But the thing is, it might take us a year or so if we're lucky, maybe twenty if we weren't, where you bios can do the main business any night after work" (2:224). When Marble proposes to make a child with Hammerstone, the joke is again sexual. Nettle, a young girl at Silk's manteion, announces when caught spying, "Maytera caught me and made me quit, but when she went to work on her child again I came back" (4:316). Nettle seems to witness at the keyhole a comically primal Freudian scene between robots.

Shy and supportive, a chem like Mint can be inspired by the gods to become General Mint, commander of the rebellion against the Ayuntamiento. Details of the their bodies come as surprises to the reader: as Maytera Marble comforts Silk, "smiling she clasped his hand in hers, surprising him. The soft skin had worn from the tips of her fingers long ago, leaving bare steel darkened like her thoughts by time, and polished by unending toil" (1:60). The image is hardly plausible if we wish to read with the eye of the scientist, and in that sense science fantasy is consistently inconsistent. But most readers will be more pleased than bothered, for we perceive not so much the metal, but a metaphor for fingers worked to the bone. We take these dedicated and loving women not as mechanical creatures at all, but as people, interesting people in an intricate and interesting fiction, which itself begins to lose its boundaries, as I hope I have demonstrated, as fiction at all. Just as with the gods and the Outsider we are ultimately confronted with the mysteries of duty and sexuality in our world, transformed under the illusion of the fictional imagination.

The jolting of the fictional rules by which we interpret the game we're playing as readers, whether we're trying to figure out gods or chems, are not unpleasant violations of genre rules but opportunities for humor and understanding that most of us would choose to enjoy with complicity. Wolfe affords the reader the luxury of a long escape from our world into a new Whorl but reminds us ultimately that this fiction is still grounded in our world. As *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* argues, fantasy isn't an escape from mimetic reality, but an adjustment of perception that restores our ability to know our world, changing our perception of it.

Science fantasy proves to be, in Wolfe's hands, as stimulating as Scholes had hoped. Its very instability and inconsistency is precisely what generates sparkling ironies, moving the reader through hypotheses of the primacy of science to comical revelations that characters from the whorl listen to with straight-faced credulity, to a vehicle to revisit one of our culture's most continuing and compelling mysteries—in what way is God in our world? Science fantasy, the

genre of impossible objects, easily lends itself to the exploration of longstanding issues of mysterious multiple perspectives within our own world.

Notes

1. I've capitalized the terms that lead to entries within the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Such references constitute a sort of hypertext version of the most comprehensive theoretical approach to fantasy now available.
2. Citations refer to the paperback editions. As I develop answers to questions about the relationship of the "whorl" of the Long Sun to our world, I stay within the four-volume series itself rather locate answers within other works by Wolfe. Discussion on connections to earlier works has been a hot topic on the internet—see in particular the archive of discussions at http://moonmilk.volcano.or/whorl/archives, and the review by John Clute. I received a copy of Michael Andre-Driussi's *Quick and Dirty Guide to the Long Sun Whorl* by the time I had finished this paper, but subsequent versions of this guide, available through Sirius Fiction in San Francisco, could be very valuable for further study.

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