



Review: “The Golden Age” trilogy
By John C. Wright
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Review of John C. Wright’s “The Golden Age” (vol. 1), “The Phoenix Exultant” (vol. 2) and “The Golden Transcendence” (vol. 3).

Science fiction stories often take place in the future—sometimes the very far future, as in the case of Mr. Wright’s excellent trilogy—but the issues involved and the attitudes of the characters portrayed are inevitably those of concern to people alive at the time of the author’s writing. Fiction serves as a tool both to distance the reader from these issues and to highlight them through inflation, elaboration and dramatization. Questions that are only of concern today to philosophers and dreamers become crucial, life-or-death matters to the characters in these stories.

If you have not yet read Mr. Wright’s “Golden Age” trilogy, then you have an aesthetic and intellectual feast ahead of you: go eat it now! You will almost certainly enjoy the experience. And after finishing all three books, you will not be disturbed by the SPOILERS NEAR THE END OF THIS REVIEW (warning will be given again before they appear).

These books are that most rare combination of riveting story-telling and deep thinking on issues of personal identity, cultural diversity, economics, politics, artificial intelligence and evolution, all served up in polished prose of unusually elegant style and wit. Mr. Wright has clearly pondered these matters deeply. The world he constructs is detailed, self-consistent, and in many ways, extremely attractive.

“The Golden Age” follows the story of Phaethon (full name: Phaethon Prime of Rhadamanth), a man living in a polity called the Golden Oecumene circa 500,000 C.E. Phaethon is the legal heir of his sire, Helion (full name: Helion Relic of Rhadamanth), who designed his offspring according to his own aims. In this far-future era, there is no messy, hit-or-miss biological reproduction by the genetic lottery of the past; all babies are designer babies.

The Golden Oecumene comprises the volume of the solar system from the sun to Saturn. From Neptune out into the Kuiper belt lies the lawless realm of the Cold Dukes. The boundary between these areas of space is technological, not legal or physical, rather as on Earth in earlier centuries the Law of the Sea was said to extend as far as a ship’s cannon could fire. In the Golden Age, the technological boundary limit is the practical

range of the immortality system. This is not the first, highly localized form of physical immortality, but the much broader Second Immortality, which was invented by Orpheus Myriad Avernus, who holds proprietary control of it. The Second Immortality system performs real-time back-ups of all enrolled minds within its purview. If the body inhabited by a mind were to be destroyed, the mind back-up would immediately be reinstated on a new bodily platform. Within the Golden Oecumene, physical immortality is easily available; outside it, in the dark realm of the Neptunian Cold Dukes and beyond, one lives only as long as one can find the resources to maintain life—and to stave off the attacks of others.

A variety of persons, or intelligences, inhabit the Golden Oecumene, and are divided into two main groups: biochemical self-aware entities, and electrophotonic self-aware entities. In general terms, we can think of the former group as enhanced humans and the latter as artificial intelligence, or as Mr. Wright labels them, sophotechs. The biochemical self-aware entities (enhanced humans) are further classified according to their neuroforms, or mental architectures. Each neuroform features its own style of thinking and specialization. These range from base neuroforms like Phaethon, an engineer; to alternative organization neuroforms (also called Warlocks) like Ao Aoen, the master-dreamer; to cortical-thalamicly integrated neuroforms (also called Invariants) like Kes Sennec, the logician; to cerebelline neuroforms like Wheel-of-Life, the ecological mathematician; to the mass-mind compositions, like the Eleemosynary Composition, which has absorbed many individual minds into a single group-consciousness.

All of these persons live in the physical world, but their enhanced neural architectures feature the ability to perceive the world according to their own chosen sense filters. This ability is a crucial part of the Golden Age storyline. People of various neuroforms affiliate according to the particular style of sense filtering they prefer. These styles are termed schools, just as we would speak of a school of art, like the Impressionist or the Cubist. For example, imagine a common scene, such as a city street with people strolling along. Then think of how an Impressionist artist like Monet might paint this scene. Now imagine how differently a Cubist like Picasso would paint the same scene. In the same way, each school filters the senses of its members so that they perceive according to the ethos of that school.

Phaethon is a member of the Silver-Gray Manorial School, which impresses a sense filtering ethos using the imagery and speech patterns of Victorian England. The Silver-Gray School was founded by Phaethon's sire, Helion, but it is run by the sophotech named Rhadamanthus who is therefore called the school's manor-house.

The exceptions to this sense filtering are the Invariants, who are severely logical and realistic—imagine Star Trek's Mr. Spock among the Logical Positivists of the Vienna Circle—and the sophotechs, whose artificial intelligence far surpasses the mind-power of even the most enhanced human neuroform. Some sophotechs work as the core systems of the various schools, while others operate individually or in clusters, managing the mundane operations of the economy of the Golden Oecumene, facilitating its social events, and conducting its scientific and mathematical research. The sophotechs are as ethical as they are powerful, and they are devoted to a policy of non-interference with human autonomy. They help the human neuroforms as advisors and aids, but they will not command or manipulate them.

The Golden Oecumene has no real government. It has a legal system of sophotech judges, and a popular assembly called the College of Hortators. The College debates issues and makes decrees that are only enforced by moral suasion. This turns out to be as effective as any legislation in an earlier age, because to flout a decree of the College of Hortators is to risk being censured and shunned. Shunning is an age-old practice that has

worked well in Amish communities to this day. In the far future of the Golden Oecumene, shunning is even more effective because it is implemented through sense filtering. The shunned person is not merely ignored; he is literally invisible.

In addition to the College of Hortators, real power rests with the economic barons of the Golden Oecumene, the aristocratically-named Peers. The Peers choose their own membership. Among them are Orpheus Myriad Avernus, founder of the Second Immortality; Kes Sennec, the Invariant logician; and Helion, the sire of Phaethon and builder of the solar array for managing energy of the Sun from inside the star itself.

Now to the story...AND THE SPOILERS. Phaethon the engineer discovers, at the start of the first book, that he has forgotten something. As he begins to make enquiries about his surprising memory loss, he is told again and again that he should leave well enough alone. At last, he learns that he himself agreed to have certain memories sequestered. If he breaks the seal and retrieves these memories, he will be in violation of his agreement, and will be accountable to the College of Hortators.

Phaethon breaks the seal and retrieves his memories. He learns that he had spent the last three hundred years building the only star ship in the Golden Oecumene. The Peers opposed this. Now Phaethon is in violation of his agreement and will be punished.

Bad as that is, Phaethon is even more distressed when he finds that his beloved wife Daphne (full name: Daphne Tercius Semi-Rhadamanth) has left him and locked herself into a virtual reality capsule within her native Red School. He cannot reach her by message or by touch. Daphne is as lost to Phaethon as if she were dead.

Even worse, Phaethon finds himself under attack. No one else witnesses these attacks. And when Phaethon agrees to allow his memories to be probed, even these recordings from his own mind fail to verify his claims.

An even more ambiguous situation develops when Daphne seems to come back to Phaethon. Then he recognizes this Daphne as a "doll" or synthetic version of his wife. At first he rejects her. But this synthetic, modified version of Daphne proves to be so much kinder, tougher and more loving than his actual wife, that Phaethon falls in love with her.

Much more happens, but I am done with spoiling your fun. Let me conclude by listing some of the issues Mr. Wright raises in this splendid trilogy:

Are we our memories? Can we live satisfying lives if part of our past has been hidden from us?

Can we trust our perceptions? And when we enhance ourselves through transhumanist technologies, giving us virtually complete control over our sensory apparatus, how will we judge the veracity of what we see and hear?

Is society better off if civility is enforced by moral suasion rather than elective government? Should an individual be allowed to give up his memories as part of a contractual agreement?

What defines personhood? Is the synthetic copy of Daphne in some sense less than the original? But how can this copy, with its improved capacities for love, struggle and kindness, be less than the original?

Finally, when the immortality system makes a back-up copy of a mind and then reinstantiates it in another body, is this mind the same person or a different one? In other words, is the person a pattern or is there something essential about a particular body-mind that cannot be copied and reproduced?