

Silhouette

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 31 Jul 1998

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1032>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Robert Borski — 31 Jul 1998, 22:03

Given that in "Silhouette" we have a literal Deus ex machina--originally a convention of stagecraft--plus a panoply of characters who are known only by their first names or rank (the stuff of allegory), in addition to a series of scenes that recapitulate Biblical events, from Genesis to the Harrowing of Hell to the Second Coming, I'd like to suggest the following about "Silhouette:" in my opinion it's meant to be read as the science fiction equivalent of a medieval Mystery Play. Throw in a little Francis Bacon--"Silhouette," after all, was originally published in an anthology entitled NEW ATLANTIS--and keeping in mind that Bacon's central conceit attempts to argue that science can be used to bolster religious tenets, I think I might be ready to make an attempt at rendering sense of one of Gene Wolfe's more enigmatic works.

Mystery Plays, of course, were loosely based on Biblical events (or medieval variations thereof), and so that's how I'd like to frame most of my discussion. Also keep in mind Mystery Plays jumped around a lot--they didn't always present events chronologically, and often juxtaposed time, place and action, so you often got a hodge-podge of narrative skeins.

Johann, a lieutenant aboard an unnamed ship orbiting Neuerddraht, a planet in the Algol system, is Silhouette's viewpoint character. He is crippled in one leg like so many Wolfe characters (most people attempt to link this to Wolfe's childhood bout with polio, but his maternal grandfather also had a wooden leg), and so has Christlike qualities, but when we first meet him, he's surrounded by the icefoam walls of his compartment. Icefoam, being a polymer of water, is placental in nature; the ship is also constantly rearranging itself--mitotic imagery. Both of these notions suggest the instauration of a new universe. But this time around will God's first words be "Fiat Lux" or the opposite: "Let darkness reign." And of course we immediately note that the lights in Johann's apartment have begun to go out--despite a maintenance check that asserts this is not so. I think it's also important at this point to keep in mind a quote from another Johann--St. John the Divine: "Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."

Neuerddraht--German for "New Earth Wire"--will be, if all goes well, the new Eden. "Earth is sick" and Johann's ship is meant to find habitable worlds to colonize. But while Neuerddraht has the verdure of Eden, it also has unusually high ultraviolet--something more akin to hell. (Algol, in fact, means Demon Star.) The "wire" in its title also links it back to the overmonitor, which some of Johann's shipmates call God. "Wire" may as well link back to the leisure satellite Pleasureworld--another sinister false Eden (note how it's called Pleasureworld, not Heaven), with its garden (the Forest of Trees) grown from recycled ordure. (Cf. Johann urinating into and drinking from the same recycler.)

In the next pageant of the Mystery Play, Johann plays Adam. (Somebody once asked where the phrase God's Fingers originated--I always thought it related to the following passage from Silhouette: "In Michelangelo's painting The Creation of Adam, a floating Jehovah stretches forth his hand to the reclining Adam.") Playing not Eve, but Lilith, is the ship's Captain (who's never named). She drugs Johann and they copulate, but Johann hallucinates that he's making love to

Marcella (fr. Don Quixote?), a former, truer love--his Eve--so in a sense he's remaining faithful, at least in his mind. The forbidden knowledge motif here is carnal, not fructive. It's also mentioned that the Captain has not often availed herself sexually of Johann because his leg wound (which symbolizes Christ) turns her off. Lilith also appears in Goethe's Faust (as do the triumvirate of Grit-Gerta-Gretchen in Margarete). Having been the one to disconnect the overmonitor--"God"--she also represents the Miltonian rebel of heaven, Lucifer. And in the end she attempts to lead "awakened" marines--other rebellious angels--to the New Eden (but which is actually Hell).

More Genesis links: the overmonitor disobeying verbal commands and rephrasing questions, as well as its dispersal to other machines during its attempted disconnection, recalls the tower of Babel and what happened there, with the diaspora of post-Edenic tongues.

There's also a huge tie-in with Sodom and Gomorrah. Most of the ship's crew appears to be bisexual, although Johann refuses the advances of both Karl and Emil. Yet another crewmember who refuses to partake in this anything-goes-licentiousness is Anna, a former undercook who's committed suicide--might we not expect such behavior from someone named after the mother of the Blessed Virgin? Johann thus represents Lot here; and when he's on Neuerddraht (where a city much like ruined Sodom is later found), he's told that if he turns around and looks, the alien ghost he's channeling will become unavailable to him, recalling Lot's wife and her transubstantiation (she becomes a eucharist of salt, no?). Johann also has a difficult time disengaging his emotions from those with whom he has casual sex; i.e., he needs love to make coitus spiritually rewarding.

Christ's Passion is the next event in the Silhouette Mystery Play. Johann transported via astral projection to Neuerddraht represents Christ's walk in the Garden of Gethsemane. The scratches he receives there represent Christ's scourgings and the crown of thorns. The computer reports him as being either missing or dead; this is the time immediately after crucifixion, where Johann as Christ harrows Hell--a very popular motif in Mystery Plays (in fact, the earliest known English Mystery Play is entitled The Harrowing of Hell). Here his alien companion represents the souls Jesus succors from the fires of damnation. The name "Johann" here also recalls Johann Sebastian Bach, not only because of his fugue walks, but because Bach suggests yet another harrower of hell, Orpheus, who's also counseled to look straight ahead (but who still loses Eurydice in the end). Johann/Christ returns to the ship (the Resurrection), and with the alien at his side, and with a few loyal crewmembers (note how his affection transfers from Grit to Gerta ["Pearl"]--another transubstantiation image, but more positive), and is able to carry the day (the Second Coming). His first act as Captain? To turn their ship away from the false Eden/Hell of Neuerddraht, and chart a new course for elsewhere. It's now the redemptive Eighth Day (as the title of one of Johann's books by Thornton Wilder suggests).

As for Wolfe's rather Baconian attempt at explaining astral projection in terms of quantum/temporal mechanics, this fits in with the New Atlantis angle I mentioned earlier, and makes it seem less "New Agey" in some respects, at least in regards to some of the other beliefs advocated by the various cult factions. But less so is the silhouette of the title--the alien ghost/familiar Johann channels. Is his ability to host the alien based on his belief in "God"? (The word, according to the alien, exists in Johann's brain--unlike his shipmates, who use books like gambling chips, Johann reads, which also recalls, as I've argued before, the Gospel of St. John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.") Does the alien symbolize the soul and all things spiritual? Is it the shadow of the Almighty, and Johann its priest-king summoner? Is Johann with his Covenant a benign Johannes Faustus?

Perhaps there's a clue in the etymology of mystery, at least as it relates to Mystery Plays, for here the keyword does not derive from mysterium, but ministerium, the same word which gives

us minister.

Johann as minister; Wolfe as magister. The curtain lowers. Who knows what the next Mystery Play by our favorite lupine may depict?

Robert Borski