

White Wolves

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 22 Mar 1999

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Robert Borski — 22 Mar 1999, 00:52

From SWIMMING WITH THE UNDINES, Excerpt # 2:

After Severian manages to extricate himself from the antechamber where he and Jonas have been imprisoned, and goes looking for Terminus Est, he accidentally discovers Hethor's friend Beuzac hiding in a loft. Later, when he returns to the same closet, he discovers Beuzac has crawled out a hole in the back. That prompts this response: "It is said that in the House Absolute such recesses are inhabited by a species of white wolf that slunk in from the surrounding forests long ago. Perhaps he fell prey to these creatures."

Still later (and we must remember Severian is writing his memoirs at some future remove, so the time frame involved is much longer), Sev has this to say about apocryphal lupines lurking about: "In wandering [the Secret House's] narrow corridors, I have seen no white wolves."

Gene Wolfe, of course, frequently inserts these sorts of punning references to wolves in his works--they're the literary equivalent of cameos, and very similar to the appearances director Alfred Hitchcock made in his films. But other than this, and playing off a rather prominent urban legend (i.e., albino alligators in the sewers of New York), do the white wolves have any special significance? And why are they no longer present in the House Absolute? Thecla, at one point, remembers coursing them [1], so apparently there is some truth to Sev's statement.

Two separate possibilities occur to me. Although interestingly, each plays to the same notion.

The first involves the *alzabo*. While Gene Wolfe no doubt based part of his *alzabo* on Borges, a significant part also draws upon Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*. Michael Andre-Driussi mentions the latter in his *Lexicon Urthus*, but neglects to mention that Pliny also writes of another fabulous beast called the *leucrocota*, which translated from the Greek means "white dog-wolf." (Actually, Pliny borrows heavily upon Ctesias the Cnidian's *Indica*, where the creature is known as a *crocotta*, *kynolykos*, or *cynolycus*, "dog-wolf"). At any rate both the *cynolycus* and the *leucrocota* are likened to be a species of hyena with a special facility of imitating the human voice, just like Wolfe's *alzabo*. Does this mean that at one time there were *alزابos* running around the House Absolute? Possibly. Keep in mind that Wolfe has always portrayed himself as a translator of the New Sun manuscript, and that one of the perils of translating is choosing the right equivalent word in the second language.[2] One translator's *leucrocota* might therefore be another's *alzabo*. And to some extent having *alزابos* in the House Absolute, or access thereto, makes sense, because it would allow a steady and fresh supply of analeptic to be on hand, in case of dire event. As for why they are no longer around after Severian the Great takes office, there's no need for them--Sev is the last of Urth's autarchs, the redemptive New Sun.

The second possible meaning of white wolf has its origins in alchemy. Antimony--which is brittle white in color--was known mediievally as *lupus metallorum*, owing to its use in purifying gold. As Joannes Agricola in his *Treatise on Gold* puts it [3], "The Grey Wolf must eat the Lion, which must be devoured by it three times, after first purifying itself and cleansing its eyes with the

Wolf's blood, so that they shine brightly. The Wolf is the antimony; the Lion, however, the pure gold." Again, since Sev is the true New Sun--symbolically, pure gold--there's no need for any purifying reagents--hence no white wolves in the House Absolute.

[1] This sounds like a dangerous activity. Then again, look what happens every year during the Feast of San Fermin in Pamplona, Spain.

[2] Mistranslations, of course, are part and parcel of all such work. E.g., lukos--wolf--has often been mistranslated as leukos--light. While a more pertinent example has Sev pondering over the constellation called The Eight, which curiously has only three stars. The constellation he's talking about is our Octans, meaning octant--an eighth of a circle--which is triangular-shaped. Hence someone in the future, in compiling his or her atlas of the sky, has mistranslated Octans as The Eight.

[3] Agricola here is actually commenting on a passage found in The Twelve Keys, a famous alchemical work written by Basil Valentine, a Benedictine Monk of the 15th century.

Robert Borski

Charles Dye — 22 Mar 1999, 20:10 · follows Robert Borski

"Robert Borski" <rborski at coredcs.com> writes:

Gene Wolfe, of course, frequently inserts these sorts of punning references to wolves in his works--they're the literary equivalent of cameos, and very similar to the appearances director Alfred Hitchcock made in his films.

Adding my two asimis' worth to the "cameo" theory: Little Severian, asking for a bedtime story, demands that "There should be wolfs [sic] in it."

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