

Ascians

The Urth list — 6 messages, 6 voices, 29 Mar 1999

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Robert Borski — 29 Mar 1999, 01:22

From SWIMMING WITH THE UNDINES, Excerpt #4:

In THE CITADEL OF THE AUTARCH, the concluding volume of Gene Wolfe's New Sun quartet, a very strange scene takes place. A battle between the Ascians and the Commonwealth has been raging; during a temporary lull, however, Severian, our narrator and the novel's protagonist, notes the following:

"The savages seemed to have vanished. A new force appeared in their place, on the flank that had now become our front. At first I thought they were cavalry on centaurs, creatures whose pictures I had encountered in the brown book. I could see the heads and shoulders of the riders above the human heads of their mounts, and both appeared to bear arms. When they drew nearer, I saw they were nothing so romantic: merely small men--dwarfs, in fact--upon the shoulders of very tall ones." (CITADEL, 180)

Only later, as Severian immerses himself in the fray, does he realize the even more bizarre aspect of these ridden tallmen:

"One of the tallmen dashed forward...As he drew nearer he slowed, and I saw that his eyes were unfocused, and that he was in fact blind." (181)

Possibly, dear friends, these passages sound familiar in a déjà vu kind of way--especially if you've traveled the larger Wolfe universe. Because these blind tallmen with their dwarf riders actually first appear in "'A Story,' by John Marsch," the middle novella of THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS. John Sandwalker, along with his newly-made allies, the Shadow children, is being stalked by four marshmen at this juncture. Fortunately, Sandwalker and company are anything but defenseless:

"A man loomed in front of him and Sandwalker kicked him expertly, then drove the head down with his hands to meet his knees; he took a step backwards and a Shadow child was on the man's shoulders, his fleshless legs locked around the throat and his fingers plunged into the hair. 'Come,' Sandwalker said urgently, 'we have to get away.'

" 'Why?' The Shadow child sounded calm and happy. 'We're winning.' The man he rode, who had been doubled over in agony, straightened up and tried to free himself; the Shadow child's legs tightened, and as Sandwalker watched, the marshman fell to his knees."

Somewhat later, then:

"The marshman who had dropped to his knees a moment before rose shakily, and guided by the Shadow child on his shoulder's staggered away [back toward the pit]... The four men were there, three of them with riders on their shoulders, the fourth moaning and swaying, scrubbing with bloodied hands at the bleeding sockets of his eyes." (p.104-105, Scribners).

Given that the Shadow children of FIFTH HEAD are pygmy-sized, and the taller, ridden marshmen have been blinded--the same particulars being recapitulated with the tallmen cavalry in CITADEL--is Wolfe trying to tell us something about the Ascians--that, in fact, they're Annese in origin? Surely, this is not that subversive an idea; remember, according to Wolfe, the abos of Ste. Anne are actually deracinated Adamic stock, having come to the green world in several earlier migratory waves. Could not, at some future's remove, the Annese, aided and abetted by the reintroduction of spacefaring, make their way back to the mother planet? Indeed, Severian himself claims such returns are quite normal in THE URTH OF THE NEW SUN, as he's travelling from Briah to Yesod. "In ancient times," says he, "the peoples of Urth journeyed among the suns. [And while] many others stayed on that world or this, many came home at last." [1] So it's certainly well within the Wolfean range of ideaspaces that such a repatriation may have taken place. But other than the tallmen riders, is there any other evidence for this?

Well, consider the alzado. Somehow, it manages to make its way from Sainte Anne to Urth (this, of course, presupposes you accept the ghoul bear = alzado notion). It's possible the Annese may have brought it back with them as zoetic transport--imported fauna from home to populate a vivarium and perhaps provide a study or nostalgia base for future generations.

Then there's green Lune. Might not the original impulse behind its forestation be to remind the displaced Annese of their home world? It's also been orbitally shifted, if we're to believe old Rudesind, who describes a painting of a smaller, grayer moon thusly: "Doesn't seem so big either, because it wasn't so close in." Again, by moving the moon in to make it appear larger--a faux sister world--could this have been done by the heartsick Annese, pining for Sainte Anne?

Then there are several passages in CITADEL that echo either implicitly or explicitly similar passages in FIFTH HEAD. Witness, for example, Ava's remark to Severian in the lazaret where she is a Pelerine postulant and he a recovering patient: "Ascians are not human." Compare this with the account of Mrs. Blount in 5H, who describes the native Annese with similar dispassion: "We called them the abos or the wild people. They weren't really people, you know, just animals shaped like people." And for something almost directly echoic, consider Dr. Hagsmith's remark about how the abos are "not...really human."

Meanwhile, back on Urth and still in the thick of battle, Severian apprises us of yet another salient detail: "I think I must have cut down half a dozen Ascians before I saw that they all looked the same--not that they all had the same face, but that the differences between them seemed accidental and trivial...All had large, brilliant, wild eyes, hair clipped nearly to the skull, starved faces, screaming mouths, and prominent teeth." This too has a parallel in FIFTH HEAD, where, as we're told by Number Five, because of the small population base, "most of us have a kind of planetary face." And how very much like some mad machination of Maitre, whose outsourced Wolfe clones, especially if they're allowed to reproduce, might well come to dominate the Sainte Croix gene pool. Indeed, though the words are Appian's, the following might well summarize the end, if subconscious, result of Maitre's cloning experiments--even more so if they're continued by Number Five and his successors: "They [the Ascians] wish the race to become a single individual...the same, duplicated to the end of number." Granted, the Wolfes of Saint Croix are hardly Annese autochthons (except for possibly Aunt Jeannine); but even if refractive, I still maintain the parallels are germane.

But what about the abos' characteristic lack of manual dexterity? Is there anything in the New Sun books that seems to indicate the Ascians are any less impaired? In my opinion, no. From what Severian tells us the Ascian regulars are equipped with energy spears--not exactly

weapons that appear to require a great deal of cheiral finesse. And while the dwarf tallriders also utilize bows-and-arrows, if the marshmen of Sainte Anne can weave and deploy fishing nets, it does not seem that big of a stretch to imagine them notching an arrow and pulling back a bowstring (recall as well Victor's expertise with ropes and knots--Dr. Marsch being most impressed with this if we're to believe his diary entries).

Even Severian the Great eventually seems to realize the Ascians are something other than simple battle foes. At least that's how I interpret his asking Appian, "Who are they?" Or as he elaborates in asking for yet further clarification from the old autarch, "I asked who they are, sieur. I know they're our enemies, that they live to the north in the hot countries, and that they're said to be enslaved by Erebus. But who are they?" What exactly, however, isn't covered by Severian's précis? Could it be planet of origin? A not-so-much who are they, but what are they? At any rate he's told by Appian, "Who they are you will discover in due time," although we never hear Severian disclose any such result within the New Sun narrative frame. (And yet he does spend a year with them later. Is this a clue?)

But if indeed the answer to Severian's triply-asked question is that the Ascians are our old friends and lost cousins, the abos of Sainte Anne, let's consider the delicious irony of this. In classical mythology, because they live in the torrid zone, the Ascians have no meridian shadow twice yearly (Ascian actually means 'without shadow'). If we accept the notion that shadow represents soul--a popular motif in fairy tales--and that having souls makes us uniquely human [1], it seems possible to connect the shadowlessness of the Ascians with their enslavement to Erebus, one of Urth's alien great monsters. Having apparently returned to their mother world in some glory (imagine the resources needed to terraform and shift the moon), rather than be content with this, the Annese/Ascians have chosen to cast their lots with megatherian Erebus, a being named after the underworld darkness beneath Hades through which all dead must pass. In other words, now soulless, the former Shadow children have gone apenumbral, becoming in a completely different sense, well, yes, shades--and by so doing forfeit both humanity and future.

But then in many respects this is what FIFTH HEAD is about, even if it does unofficially conclude in a series about transcendence and resurrection: a descent through various levels of darkness, and ending in hell.

For surely, repatriated to Urth, but mocked by forested green Lune in the skies above them, this is where the Shadow children and their brethren have wound up--enslaved by an alien overseer, condemned to speak in stock phrases, shadowless in the dying, sun-impooverished inferno of home. In which case Severian's year-long sojourn among them might well represent not so much diplomatic niceties, but the harrowing of hell itself.

[1] Actually, I reversed clauses for effect here. Your indulgence is begged.

[2] Wolfe as Master Ash seems to endorse this view when he has Ash relate the tale about how "a man sold his shadow and found himself driven out wherever he went." Why? "No one would believe that he was human."

Robert Borski

m.driussi — 29 Mar 1999, 14:46 · follows Robert Borski

Another possible link between Ascians and abos from St. Anne?

NAME LANGUAGE

Urth English (phonetic form of Earth)

Verthandi Old Norse

Skuld Old Norse
Lune French

Not only does the orbit of the sister worlds Urth/Lune replicate that of St. Anne/St. Croix, but the language "French" is used to name the one (presumably the last of the terraformed worlds; presumably terraformed or at least named by a different civilization than the one that terraformed Mars and Venus) and spoken by abos on the other ("remember, you're =French=").

=mantis=

Tony Ellis — 29 Mar 1999, 16:19 · follows m.driussi

mantis wrote:
NAME LANGUAGE
Urth English (phonetic form of Earth)
Verthandi Old Norse
Skuld Old Norse
Lune French

Urth is also Norse. It's another name for Urd, the third of the three Norns. Verthandi was the Fate of the Present, Skuld Fate of the Future, and Urth Fate of -surprise surprise - the Past.

Dan Rabin — 30 Mar 1999, 23:11 · follows Tony Ellis

Robert Borski has pointed out some very close correspondences between Wolfe's treatments the Annese of Fifth Head and of the Ascians of New Sun. I don't, however, find myself persuaded to his conclusion that they are the same race in the subcreated (to use Tolkien's terminology) world of the books. Rather, I think the correspondences are a manifestation of Wolfe's tendency to use the same motifs repeatedly.

One of Wolfe's most consistent concerns is to probe the boundaries of what it is to be human and to remain human. Not just the cloned line and shape-changers of Fifth Head and Erebus's slaves in New Sun, but also the narrator of "The HORARS of War" and of "The Other Dead Man" and Dr. Talos and Baldanders and the gods (and inhumani) in Long Sun and the roomful of corpses in "The Packerhaus Method" all represent Wolfe's continual prodding at this thin line. If Wolfe employs similar inventions to treat a recurring theme, must we interpret these recurrences as multiple descriptions of a single feature of the subcreated world, or can we just assume that he finds the imagery compelling? I generally prefer the latter explanation (although I'll be the first to admit that I leaped to conclusions about a certain "Twice-Headed Pas" when reading Nightside the Long Sun).

In the specific case of the Ascians, I find it more satisfying as a reader to think of them as being actual Urth humans who made a bad deal with Erebus, thereby losing their humanity (in the view of the Pelerines). I think that "Loyal to the Group of Seventeen's Story" establishes the essential humanity of Ascians: Severian notes that the ability to tell a story cannot be crushed, and perhaps we are to take storytelling as a proxy for Wolfean humanity. In New Sun itself the encounter with the Ascians is preceded by an encounter with zoanthrops, whose nonhumanity is asserted by Severian to little Severian and never contradicted.

I'm certainly glad to have these recurrences pointed out, but I don't think they imply identity.

-- Dan Rabin

Peter Westlake — 31 Mar 1999, 12:48 · follows Dan Rabin

Another connection, to augment rather than contradict the ideas so far:

In Vance's *The Dragon Masters*, the human beings breed dragons from their reptilian alien enemies, who in turn breed mounts from humans. They are farther from the human form than the blind Ascians, but very reminiscent all the same. And we know Wolfe is a Vance fan.

Peter.

Michael Straight — 31 Mar 1999, 09:35 · follows Peter Westlake

On Tue, 30 Mar 1999, Dan Rabin wrote:

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Am I right in understanding you to mean that you feel you leaped to that conclusion too soon, rather than that you disagree that Pas=Typhon?

-Rostrum