

Of the Nature of the Aborigines of St. Anne, and the Problem of Their Poor Manual Dexterity

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Mitchell A. Bailey — 04 Apr 1999, 22:18

"If it's possible for someone to lose his humanity, surely it must be possible for something that once had none to find it. What one loses, another finds, everywhere." - Severian, telling the Pelerine acolyte in the lazarette about Jonas; BNS, *_Citadel_*, ch. 10.

One of us Urthlings remarked not long ago that a reader would be justified in deciding Dorcas was unrelated to Severian. The same principle applies with more force to *_The Fifth Head of Cerberus_*. The first thing I caught on to in reading the three stories was that Wolfe intends for the reader to make up his/her own mind regarding such basic questions as whether the abos ever existed at all, are Roy and Victor Trenchard abo or crossbreeds of abos, is Veil's hypothesis in any sense correct, and so forth.

Like a pupil of Mr. Million's enduring his old-fashioned debating-team pedagogy, we can research the text and make valid arguments in support of either case. In fact I think that could be what Wolfe is telling us via the portrayal of Mr. Million's approach to teaching.

Therefore, I would have to start by assuming the abos did exist, and that the Trenchards were at minimum in very close contact with real abos, if not themselves the genuine article. This is important to understand if we are to draw evidence from "A Story", probably written by Victor Trenchard while impersonating the deceased John Marsch, PhD. Victor could draw on not only whatever anthropology and other scientific knowledge he gleaned from Dr. Marsch and his books while researching for his imposture, but also his own lifelong exposure to Annese culture and legend.

We also have to credit that the idea that a visit occurred by explorers from offplanet, possibly Sol in the Fighting Lizard, is authentic abo folklore, and not an invention of Victor's. Much depends on the extent to which "A Story" can be presumed to represent 'genuine' abo culture and folklore.

With the foregoing in mind, I offer my interpretation of the nature of the Annese and why they lack manual dexterity.

The strangest inhabitant of a certain green world was one which I, taking a cue from Mr. Borski, will call the pleiomorph. It probably (like the alzado) has per se about the intelligence of a dog. It probably was an omnivore. Its essential characteristic was the ability to convincingly mimic practically anything living or inanimate found in its habitat. This ability to totally camouflage itself certainly protected it from tire-tigers, ghoul-bears, neagles, and other dangerous predators, and doubtless assisted it in capturing fish, rodents, birds, and the like. It is hard to say what its native shape may have been. It may well have come not to possess what we would call a natural form of its own, so completely did it live in disguise. The Shadow Children remember them as wormlike creatures which lived in holes beneath the roots of trees.

Quite possibly the pleiomorph gained the ability to mimic, not merely wood or stone or mud, but a complex animal such as a ghoul-bear or tire-tiger, to discourage attack or to scare lesser predators from their kills. Presumably, a pleiomorph ghoul-bear might look sound, and even (eccch!) smell like the real thing, such being the quality of its mimicry as was necessary to convince real predators, but it would not itself make use of the claws and teeth it generates and start hunting critters and carrion in like fashion to a real ghoul-bear. That kind of transformation is probably unnecessary for the pleiomorph's purposes, and obviously far harder to achieve, so presumably it didn't happen.

The pleiomorphs had the potential to become almost anything, given an extraordinary stimulus.

In a time long before the history we know, twenty light years from the green planet, on Earth, Homo Sapiens appeared. Eventually a civilization now vanished into vague legend, which I will refer to as "Atlantis", arose. The "Atlanteans" eventually developed interstellar travel or befriended Extrasolarians who had it. In the fullness of time, "Atlanteans" discovered and colonized the green planet.

The "Atlantean" colony on the green planet no doubt impressed some of the pleiomorphs, perhaps initially as a source of easy food. Very soon, the newcomers from Earth discovered they shared the planet with humanoid creatures. Probably they eventually befriended and taught them. The pleiomorphs observed things totally outside their previous animal frame of reference. No doubt the colonists introduced them to such concepts as stories, songs, ritual, philosophy, and religion.

An evolution took place here which was very Lamarckian, since in this instance the evolving creature had the ability to consciously reshape itself. The pleiomorphs apparently saw in the Atlanteans something which aroused aspiration. They did not have any ambition to become ghoul-bears (understandably), but, having encountered humans, they must have longed to become human.

If a creature having relatively little intelligence but near-total pleiomorphism essays to mimic an intelligent being, does it of necessity "mimic" intelligence, and in so doing acquire the genuine article? The human child imitates, and thereby learns.

If a creature which is not human mimics humans, lifelong, could it in so doing acquire humanity? Could its species do so by repeating the process over countless generations?

The prehistoric human colonists offered the pleiomorphs the fruit of the tree of knowledge; the fall must inevitably follow.

Even as some of the pleiomorphs evolved and became more or less permanently humanoid by preference, the human "Atlantean" colonists eventually degenerated and dwindled. This process was augmented by the fall of "Atlantis" and by a lowly psychoactive herb of the green planet.

At some point possibly even before the interstellar civilization of "Atlantis" fell and vanished, the descendants of "Atlantean" colonists on the green planet took to chewing the coca-like leaves of the alkaloid-bearing herb, permitting them to "find their songs" and, according to folklore, gain paranormal abilities. The Old Wise One who spoke to Sandwalker implied that this caused the "Atlantean" colonists to lose interest in intercourse with their fellows elsewhere in the galaxy. The "Atlantean" colony on the green world eventually cut itself off from communication. All the implements of technology the colonists possessed, in which they

likewise lost interest, slowly wore out, broke down, and corroded away little by little as descendants of colonists learned to live as autochthons from the land.

Over dreamy millenia, the descendants of those colonists became stunted, dark, nocturnal, and secretive, revelling languidly in memories of their past greatness in a continuous alkaloid-induced rush. They became the Shadow Children, elusive elfin neighbors to the aborigines.

The aborigines for their part imitated the "Atlantean" humans they remembered in precise detail continuously for so long they now believed themselves to be human. This may have advanced to the point that they forgot they had the ability to drastically shape-change, and kept themselves in a more-or less human configuration, albeit camouflaged.

Meantime, "Atlantis" of the homeworld and her interstellar network collapsed and vanished.

Did the Shadow Children surrender much, if not all, of their humanity to telepathic mindsong and drugged dream, while the pleiomorphs found theirs?

Then the "long dreaming days" ended with the landing by the first French explorers.

Quite probably no Terran of the latter wave of colonization, French or English-speaking, ever encountered or spoke to a Shadow Child personally after that first landing (did Wolf, accompanying Sandwalker, go forth with him and greet the newcomers on the beach, or hide in the fashion of Shadow Children?) , but knew them only from the tales of the abos of mountain and marsh.

Within two more centuries, the abos themselves had likewise faded, in whatever manner, to "something less than legend".

It is accepted theory that the ancestors of human beings developed intelligence in tandem with dextrous hands and stereoscopic color vision. Hands, in a sense, were crucial in making us as a species what we are. I would not of course question the humanity of an individual who lost the use of hands, but hands were a crucial element in the making of Mankind into that which we think of as human.

The pleiomorph-aborigine of the green planet *_bypassed_* this process by acquiring intelligence through imitation of those who possessed it already. Pleiomorphs acquired the look, intelligence, and culture of human primitives, but were they fully functional humans? Well, apparently those hands were largely, as we would say, "for show". The marshmen were said to make and use nets, but no one could produce an example of such a net. The boy Victor boasted of his ability to catch unwary waterfowl and fish without such implements. Could they not have simply formed their own limbs into configurations more suited to catching fish, instead?

The insect which looks like a leaf does not acquire the leaf's ability of photosynthesis. The pleiomorph which mimicked a ghou-bear looked, sounded, and behaved as a real ghou-bear, but presumably did not acquire the use of the stinking teeth and claws it copied. The pleiomorph who mimicked a human being of Earth looked and behaved the part, but did not necessarily have the full use of those hands it formed.

Hence, a possible explanation for the fabled characteristic poor manual dexterity of the abos of St. Anne.