

# Hethor, Moby Dick, the Essex, Death, Limbo, Resurrection (etc.)

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Peter Stephenson — 23 Jul 2000, 21:49

Two thoughts inspired by the meeting with Hethor in chapter XXXV (the last) of Shadow.

The first has two threads. Some time last year, I noted a similarity between Severian's night in the inn where he meets Baldanders and Dr Talos and the passage early in Moby Dick where `Ishmael' meets Queequeg. This seemed to be uncontroversial --- several other people had already noticed the parallels.

Secondly, even earlier than that, I had replied to a posting where someone quoted Hethor from chapter XXXV:

I u-understand you more than you think, I the old captain, the old lieutenant, the old c-c-cook in his old kitchen, cooking soup, cooking broth for the dying pets! My master is real, but wehre are your armies? Real, and where are your empires? Sh-shall false blood run from a true wound? Where is your strength when the b-b-blood is gone, where is the luster of the silken hair? I w-will catch it in a cup of glass, I, the old c-captain of the old limping sh-ship, with its crew black against the silver sails, and the C-c-coalsack behind it.

There's another similar paragraph half a page later. I suggested, about 40% joking, that this referred to W.S. Gilbert's `Yarn of the Nancy Bell', where an elderly naval man tells about how he gradually ate his way through the crew when cast adrift after a shipwreck (`Oh, I am the cook and the captain bold, and the mate of he Nancy brig...').

Now, maybe this is well known in some quarters (such as the fo'csle), but it's news to me: there is a definite connection between Moby Dick and cannibalism at sea. Here is the opening paragraph of a review from this week's Times Literary Supplement:

The story is famous by association, because it begins where Moby-Dick ends. On November 20, 1820, the Nantucket whaleship Essex was attacked and sunk by a giant sperm whale 2,000 miles west of the Galapagos Islands. The twenty-man crew took to three boats. It took them a month to reach uninhabited Henderson Island, in the Pitcairn group, and three men chose to stay rather than face the 4,000-mile journey to South America. Of those who sailed on, the first died on January 10. Ten days later, the survivors began eating rather than burying the dead. The boats were separated, one never to be seen again. By the time the first mate's boat enocuntered a whaleship, only three men were still alive. On the captain's boat, men were not dying fast enough to keep up with consumption and lots were drawn. The captain's cousin drew the black spot and was shot. His corpse, and another death, kept the captain and a

boy alive, until they were found near St Mary's Island, off Chile, sucking the bones of their companions. After three months in an open boat, they were at the last extremity, scarcely able to comprehend their rescue and unwilling to surrender the bones that had sustained them.

(I nearly put a `_sic_` next to the hyphenated Moby Dick, but decided it was too pedantic. Don't write in.)

I quote from the final paragraph, too:

After the second wreck, Pollard [the captain; the second ship was called `_Two Brothers_`] was a Jonah, unemployable save as a nightwatchman on Nantucket's wharves. Melville, for one, was struck, after meeting him on his round in 1852, by the captain's calm acceptance that his calamity was just.

(The review is by Allen Mawer and the books reviewed are `_In the Heart of the Sea: The tragedy of the whaleship "Essex"_` by Nathaniel Philbrick, HarperCollins, 0 00 257057 2, and `_Shipwreck of the whaleship Essex_` by Owen Chase, Pimlico (paperback), 0 7126 6741 5. The article is headed ``Essex men at sea'`, a grim British social joke in thoroughly bad taste, and the page is headed ``Books for Pleasure'`. I like the TLS.)

Having read that, I can't believe that Wolfe could not have known about the Essex. It does make Hethor seem to me more credible, though without at all removing the mysteries. In particular, I have racked my brains for any explanation of the doll he had in his cabin, as described in his first monologue in chapter XXX, ``Night'`, though the nature of her ``lemon-wood box'` is perhaps worth consideration. (Why lemon-wood, anyone?)

The second point is not obviously connected with the first, and arises from my extremely dilatory third reading of the Book (no doubt delayed by the committee stage). Here we are a couple of pages later in chapter XXXV.

``Master, where do we go?"`

``Out the gate," I said, and told myself I said it because I wanted him to follow Dr. Talos and not me; the truth was that I was thinking of the preternatural beauty of the Clawa, and how sweet it would be to carry it to Thrax with me, instead of retracing my steps to the center of Nessus. I gestured toward the Wall, which now rose in the distance as the walls of a common fortress must rise before a mouse. They were black as thunderheads, and held certain clouds captive at their summit.`

``I will carry your sword, Master."`

The offer seemed honestly made, though I was reminded that the plot Agia and her brother had conceived against me had been born of their desire for `_Terminus Est_`. As firmly as I could, I said, ``No. Not now or ever."`

``I feel pity for you, Master, seeing you walk with it on your shoulder so. It must be very heavy."`

Quoted out of context, I'm amazed I didn't spot it the first two times round (although I think it's also uncontroversial that there's quite a lot of material there). Hethor isn't Simon of Cyrene, even to the extent that Severian isn't Christ, but the last paragraph fits the corresponding biblical episode precisely; \_Terminus Est\_ is likened to a cross elsewhere; and as the essays on the \_Eyeflash Miracles\_ pointed out, Wolfe certainly uses the crucifixion as a symbol of potential suffering.

Now, I'd like to suggest this helps to explain the next parts of the narrative: the passage through the Gate (without the city wall), the scattering of the fellowship, and the sudden shifting of the narrative to Severian's awakening in the inn at Saltus. There is, however, a particular flaw in this even if you grant the further parallels, which I'll come to.

The huge black gate of the city, containing 'cacogens, I think .... beings to whom the avern was but what a marigold or a marguerite is to use' is the gate of death. This is hinted at in the first chapter, itself called 'Resurrection and Death' (presumably referring, however, to his near(?) drowning), where Severian before the gate of the Necropolis speaks of his exile:

It is possible I already had some presentiment of my future. The locked and rusted gate that stood before us, with wisps of river fog threading its spikes like the mountain paths, remains in my mind nows as the symbol of my exile.

Death and exile are parallels, a common enough theme in fiction. The gate recalls the entry to Dante's Hell, which suggests something further: the scuffle that takes place is somehow parallel to the 'Harrowing of Hell', the episode where Christ is supposed (at least in medieval mythology) to have entered Limbo after his death and carried away the Patriarchs. Unhappily, not much is made of this episode in Dante (*Inferno*, canto V); it all seems to have gone surprisingly peacefully, considering. A couple of years ago (was it so long?) Mantis quoted some words from a bit further into the *Inferno* (Canto XII, vv 34ff.) which might be relevant (see volume 13, posts 55 and 60), although at the time the subject was the Mines of Saltus, and said:

Oh, right! "The one who took/from Dis the highest circle's splendid spoils" must be Herakles bringing Kerberos up for Labor Twelve. <g>

and I said (this is the third time I've quoted myself, help):

this is also a joke, right? I'm out of my depth again (which is somewhere in Malbolges), but I think it's clear it refers to the earthquake which accompanied the rending of the curtain in the temple, followed by the 'harrowing of hell', i.e. the visitor is Christ. Yes, I realise everyone knew that anyway.

The gap in the narrative is then simple enough: the 40 hours between the crucifixion and the resurrection.

The flaw in all this is perhaps obvious. It simply lacks the emotional and even narrative charge of the events supposedly paralleled. Severian and Dorcas simply part company from the others and Severian wakes up in an inn (and there is no suggestion whatsoever, despite his possession of the Claw, that \_this\_ time is any sort of 'resurrection').

While I think that's true, I'm not sure, however, that it puts an end to the matter. When I pointed out that Severian's meeting with the lochage earlier in *Shadow* was a little like Christ before Pilate, someone --- I think Tony Ellis --- quite rightly made the same objection. Yet the parallel is as clear there as it is with the carrying of the cross, above. Furthermore, we know Severian isn't

Christ anyway. It's as if the tiny echoes fit into his everyday life. This, I believe, was quite common in medieval iconography, where virtually everything in the world was supposed to have a mystical significance: to a mon, the monastery garden was the 'horus inclusus' representing the Virgin's chastity; the roses were her sweetness; the thorns were the ones that surrounded her son's head; and so on. I think Wolfe is borrowing this sort of literary rearrangement of the world for his own purposes. Severian's awakening in the inn is, after all, a \_narrative\_ resurrection, a resumption of the story after a gap of a couple of days. In Wolfe, the levels wind into one another, so that belonging and exile, death and resurrection, the story and the untold world beyond, merge into a greater whole.

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