

Latro ruminates

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 31 Aug 2000

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Nigel Price — 31 Aug 2000, 20:39

Peter Westlake (Hi Peter!) wrote:

I'm impressed by Nigel's summary, too. Were you recording it, Nigel, or just taking very good notes? I stopped writing things down when I heard the papers were to be published.

Er, well, no, I just wrote it down from memory. You know, before the blow on the head I received at the Hot Springs erased my every recollection of the day...

(As I said on Saturday, amongst his other gifts, Wolfe had given me the vocabulary to describe my inadequacies. I have the memory of Latro, the visual accuity of Master Ultan, the manual dexterity of the Annese - and the dress sense of Severian...)

Because Peter Wright was going to talk about The Fifth Head of Cerberus, I finally managed to make enough time to read it while wide awake.

Reading

before going to sleep, as I normally do, doesn't work for Wolfe! I finished it on the train, half a mile outside Birmingham, so it was fresh in my mind for Peter's talk. The only thing I would add to Nigel's synopsis is the idea that Victor is in some sense free, though imprisoned, because he is no longer part of either of the conflicting societies. (That isn't a very good way of expressing it, I fear - are you here yet, Peter?) Since then I have had a look at Robert Borski's "Cave Canem" website, and the contrast between the two interpretations is quite marked. In one, VRT is a positive figure, even becoming quite a good anthropologist, and in the other he's a crazed killer! One problem I had with "Cave Canem" is that it fails to distinguish things stated in the text from conjecture. It assumes that the cat is a shape-shifted Annese woman, for instance, which seems very unlikely to me.

I came home from the symposium determined to reread Fifth Head. The idea that the hybrid Annese-Human shape-shifter is a better anthropologist than the person whose life and role he appropriates is a fascinating one. I was convinced when Peter was reading his paper, but I want to look at it all again. I had always thought of VRT as someone who is caught in the gears of the corrupt colonial society in which he finds himself. He escapes one dead-end life by jumping into another.

I agree with you about "Cave Canem". Perceptive literary criticism does seem to walk side by

side with what seems more like invention or, at the very least, extrapolation. Am I being fair, Robert?

On the way home I read "Strange Travelers", which was probably a mistake. Reading "And When They Appear" when you're tired is not an experience I would wish on anyone. I tried reading on in the hope of finding something more upbeat ... well, most of you will have read ST, so you can imagine.

This is a story that I would like to discuss. I think I know what it's about, but, you're right, it is grim. To me, it's another example of the satirical streak in Wolfe's writings that I was talking about, and that goes right back to Operation Ares, and that early story of the boy in the tree house, saving rocks to throw at the rioters. The boy in "And when they appear" has the chance to escape by hiding in the freezer (Have I got the right story here? It's late, and you know what my memory's like...), but fails to do the sensible thing. His parents are gone, and he left alone, with inadequate, inhuman protection, and falls prey to the worst sort of human monster. A good example, too, of the melancholy that Alex was describing. (Was it here, or on Whorl?)

Peter (Spectacled Bear).

(Who, following Sev's sartorial example, turned up at the symposium bear-chested.)

Nigel