

Shadowy reflections on an amazing article

The Urth list — 12 messages, 8 voices, 17 Apr 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3161>

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Nigel Price — 17 Apr 2002, 12:27

(Well, I've finally read through all those Urth lists that you posted while I was away. I didn't know what "geritol" was, but was surprised to read of Marc's apparent surprise that someone only in their mid-forties could already be pontificating, patronising and dull. Read on, Marc, read on! And then there was Nick Gever's splendid article on Wolfe in the Washington Post. Let me pick things up there, if I may...)

I really enjoyed your excellent article in the Washington Post, Dr Nick. Thank you for that.

Can I pose a few comments and queries?

Was the section of the article entitled "Running the Maze" meant as an implicit reference to the story "A Solar Labyrinth"? In that part of your essay, you explicitly compare Wolfe's literary technique to that of the maze builder:

"The first challenge: Wolfe makes demands of the reader that are at some points exorbitant. He has the instincts of a mystery writer: He erects mazes of practical and symbolic clues, including plentiful red herrings, that require acute detective faculties to decode, and he rarely explains himself at the end."

Let me put my question another way: do you think that "A Solar Labyrinth" is in some way an allegory or metaphor for Wolfe's methods as a writer? I think that that would be my current interpretation. Although, on reading the story, the initial temptation is to make the obvious connection between the story's narrator and its author, I think that the maze builder in the story is also in some sense Wolfe, who uses materials drawn from diverse sources to construct his labyrinthine tales. There remains the possibility, however, that the maze builder stands also in some sort of symbolic relationship with God, the cunning author of the created world.

In "A Solar Labyrinth", the maze is created not by the cunning arrangement of the various objects placed in the garden, but rather, by the shadows these cunningly arranged objects cast. As the sun moves, so these shadows move, and the maze itself changes, thereby making it very much harder to solve.

Now, there seems to be a playfully Platonic element to all this, what with the maze solvers thwarted by shadows rather than even the things themselves, which is highly characteristic of Wolfe's writing, where hierarchies abound and resonant patterns of resemblances simultaneously hide and evoke the hidden purposes of God. After all, the first volume of The Book of the New Sun is titled, not for the torturer himself, but for his shadow, and in chapter XXIV of that volume, we read the assertion: "The Increate maintains all things in order surely;

and the theologicans say light is his shadow." Of course, the Increate's order can only be seen dimly, glimpsed occasionally and apprehended partially as events throw distorted shadows of a higher reality. Even those things which seem to depict the Increate's purposes most clearly are but pale imitations of the ideals they suggest. Conversely, however, the sun may shine even on a torturer, and even his shadow may show something greater than himself. (Where is it in TBotNS that Severian is caught by the light of the rising sun and casts a gigantic shadow? I think that it must be somewhere in TSotL, some time during his crossing of the mountains after his sojourn in Thrax.)

But I have gone too far down this track. Let me return to the author as maze builder. Ignoring for the moment that other great maze in Wolfe's writing, namely the labyrinth encountered by the Student ("Theseus" because of his "thesis"!) in his search for the navicaput, as told in an inset tale in TBotNS, what should we make of the movement of the shadows in "A Solar Labyrinth"? (Come to think of it, don't the channels in the maritime maze threaded by the Student also move and change about? They do! They do!)

It has often seemed to me that while Wolfe does on occasion invest certain characters and events with quite specific symbolism, the identification is usually fleeting and evanescent. Severian in some sense takes on the role of Christ when he resists Typhon's three-fold temptations, but as the author has insisted elsewhere, Severian is not Jesus, for all that he may be a pilgrim making a long and difficult journey towards God. (And yes, I reject Wright's suggestion that Severian's mission is wholly sham and solely a front for the entirely Machiavellian manipulations of hideous Hierodules.)

To take another example: at the end of TBotLS, it seemed to me for a moment that Blue and Green stood in polar opposition as possible destinations for the colonists. The Whorl was a false world from which life must ultimately pass, but the next world could be either heaven (Blue) or hell (Green). Such a stark contrast is considerably moderated by TBotSS, where Blue is revealed to be much less heavenly, although it is debatable as to whether Green is actually less hellish. (Life and love are at least possible there, albeit under appalling conditions.) But the overall pattern in TBotSS is tripartite, not binary, and the simple heaven-hell dichotomy of the destinations in TBotLS is no longer applicable.

It does seem to me that meanings shift in Wolfe's stories, just as the shadows shift in his fictional solar labyrinth.

My second query about the Washington Post article is of a somewhat different nature. In the article, words following colons have their initial letters in upper case. Is this common practice in the States, or is it a typographical ideosyncrasy of the Washington Post? Normally, at least in the UK, unless the next item is a proper noun, colons are followed by all lower case, unless, for example, a colon is used to introduce a quotation or tabular list in which the first element is a sentence in its own right. But this use is essentially for a table or a set of bullet points, not for a conventional, continuous sentence. Sorry if this is "off topic", but it is of professional interest to some of us. Any thoughts, any one?

(But wait a moment! Now I look more closely, the convention seems to be inconsistently applied. Here is an example of an upper case letter following a colon: "And he has told many: Twenty-two novels and several hundred short stories bear his name, all wondrous and enrichingly strange." But look at the first sentence of the quotation given below. The word after the colon, in this instance "length", starts with a lower case letter, as I would normally expect. Strange.)

A final query, and this time a request for clarification. Nick, you wrote:

"A second challenge: length. Wolfe's great novels aggregate into a most formidable labyrinth of words, a meta-novel 4,000 pages and 13 volumes long; to ingest the whole takes time, which the 21st century does not afford in abundance. But there are subseries that can be read singly. And the whole, its four main sections resonating together, is a grand masterpiece to be set alongside the best of Crowley, Pynchon and Updike: the entirety of human spiritual, political and colonial experience is its theme, addressed with astonishingly versatile acuity."

When you say that Wolfe's great meta-novel has 13 volumes, are you including "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" as part of the Briah Cycle? I have to agree with those who have said that while 5HC is a good thematic introduction of Wolfe, it surely isn't meant to be part of the New Sun-Long Sun-Short Sun series.

So, when you write about the "four main sections" of the meta-novel, do you mean 5HC-New Sun-Long Sun-Short Sun, or do you mean New Sun-Urth-Long Sun-Short Sun?

I was puzzled - but only about these details. I still think that it's a great article and a fine introduction to Wolfe.

Nigel

"Planet Urth is Blue
And there's nothing that I can do..."
(David Bowie comes out in support of Marc)

Jason Voegele — 17 Apr 2002, 14:17 · follows Nigel Price

Let me put my question another way: do you think that "A Solar Labyrinth" is in some way an allegory or metaphor for Wolfe's methods as a writer? I think that that would be my current interpretation. Although, on reading the story, the initial temptation is to make the obvious connection between the story's narrator and its author, I think that the maze builder in the story is also in some sense Wolfe, who uses materials drawn from diverse sources to construct his labyrinthine tales. There remains the possibility, however, that the maze builder stands also in some sort of symbolic relationship with God, the cunning author of the created world.

In the *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION*, Clute asserts that "A Solar Labyrinth" is a "meta-fiction" about the entire Urth sequence. I never understood why until I read your post.

Thanks.

Jason Voegele

James Jordan — 17 Apr 2002, 15:19 · follows Jason Voegele

A few Nutricious thoughts on an excellent essay:

At 07:27 AM 4/17/2002, Nigel wrote:

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It's both, surely. Man is the image of God. Think of "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story" (is that right?). I like the idea that this story is designed to say something about Wolfe as well as something about God. Makes sense.

(And yes, I reject

Wright's suggestion that Severian's mission is wholly sham and solely a front for the entirely Machiavellian manipulations of hideous Hierodules.)

Yes, surely. This interpretation makes sense only if Sev. is some kind of antichrist in an antiuniverse made by an antigod -- which is what I thought the first time through. But Wolfe has made it plain that this is not the case at all, and the thesis does not stand up on rereading.

To take another example: at the end of TBotLS, it seemed to me for a moment that Blue and Green stood in polar opposition as possible destinations for the colonists. The Whorl was a false world from which life must ultimately pass,

Partly false, but partly the "Old Testament," right? Not evil per se, but a womb that must be forsaken for life in the outer world.

but the next world could be either heaven (Blue) or hell (Green). Such a stark contrast is considerably moderated by TBotSS, where Blue is revealed to be much less heavenly, although it is debatable as to whether Green is actually less hellish. (Life and love are at least possible there, albeit under appalling conditions.) But the overall pattern in TBotSS is tripartite, not binary, and the simple heaven-hell dichotomy of the destinations in TBotLS is no longer applicable.

It does seem to me that meanings shift in Wolfe's stories, just as the shadows shift in his fictional solar labyrinth.

Not sure I buy this scheme. I don't think Blue and Green are heaven and hell so much as alternative possibilities in the "New Covenant" world outside the womb of the archaic world of the Whorl. I'm not trying to overlay the Roman Empire into which the Church went onto the Blue/Green situation, just saying that this kind of model makes more sense to me. The inhumi are at one level like the pagan gentiles who need to be brought into the new covenant world by the humans. But when the humans (like the Church) behave badly, one can hardly expect the inhumi-gentiles to behave well. So, I don't think Blue/Green are heaven/hell but the new situation in the new post-archaic world.

And thus I'm not sure the imagery really shifts. Returning to the Whorl is like returning to the womb of the past to recover things that were valuable but have been left behind.

Where the imagery does seem to shift is right at the end, when Silkhorn goes back to the Whorl for a new journey. Yet, since this "imagery model" is far from everything that Wolfe has put into the LS-SS narrative, this is not so much a shift of imagery as a fulfilling of another zone of imagery. Or, perhaps (and I'll bet this is part of it), Wolfe is suggesting that moving from archaic (under lesser gods/angels) to "humanist" ("mankind come of age" under the One God without

angels) is something that happens over and over in history as an application of the basic shift from the original archaic Ur-world to the New Covenant by the Theanthropos. Or, maybe even, as the heirogrammates were the humans of an earlier creation who now are acting like angels in Briah, so Silkhorn goes to the Whorl with his family to be a new Pas & Co. superintending the next archaic phase. (Maybe it wasn't the heirogrammates but some other Yesod bunch; I can't recall.)

My second query about the Washington Post article is of a somewhat different nature. In the article, words following colons have their initial letters in upper case. Is this common practice in the States, or is it a typographical ideosyncrasy of the Washington Post? Normally, at least in the UK, unless the next item is a proper noun, colons are followed by all lower case, unless, for example, a colon is used to introduce a quotation or tabular list in which the first element is a sentence in its own right. But this use is essentially for a table or a set of bullet points, not for a conventional, continuous sentence. Sorry if this is "off topic", but it is of professional interest to some of us. Any thoughts, any one?

As an editor, I can tell you that the US practice is to capitalize after a colon if what follows is a complete sentence, and not to do so if what follows is merely a list or not a full sentence. E.g.,
This is what I meant: Blue and Green are not heaven and hell.
This is what I bought: apples, oranges, and pears.

Nutria

matthew.malthouse — 17 Apr 2002, 16:10 · follows James Jordan

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<x-tab>      </x-tab>This is
what I bought: apples, oranges, and pears.
Nutria
</html>
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Although (to a UK typographer) that is correct it doesn't illustrate the point you made because Blue (In this context) is a proper noun and would be capitalized any way. [I almost wrote "in cany case" ;)]

The colon in UK English often provides for what *could* have been written as two independent sentences bing linked: thus a lower case initial letter would be used.

Matthew

Jerry Friedman — 17 Apr 2002, 22:10 · follows matthew.malthouse

--- Nigel Price <nigel.a.price at virgin.net> wrote:
(Well, I've finally read through all those Urth lists that you posted while
I was away. I didn't know what "geritol" was, but was surprised to read of
Marc's apparent surprise that someone only in their mid-forties could
already be pontificating, patronising and dull.

(For me it was the white hair.)

Read on, Marc, read on! And
then there was Nick Gever's splendid article on Wolfe in the Washington
Post.

...

I too was really impressed.

Ignoring for the moment that other great maze in Wolfe's writing,
namely the labyrinth encountered by the Student ("Theseus" because of
his "thesis"!)

There's one I never thought of.

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role of
Christ when he resists Typhon's three-fold temptations, but as the
author
has insisted elsewhere, Severian is not Jesus, for all that he may be a
pilgrim making a long and difficult journey towards God.

...

An excellent point. Or maybe Severian had a Christ-like incident happen to him. ...

"Planet Urth is Blue
And there's nothing that I can do..."
(David Bowie comes out in support of Marc)

LOL! So I forgive you for sticking the tune in my head.

Jerry Friedman

Michael Andre-Driussi — 18 Apr 2002, 02:55 · follows Jerry Friedman

Jerry Friedman quoted Nigel Price and wrote:
Ignoring for the moment that other great maze in Wolfe's writing,
namely the labyrinth encountered by the Student ("Theseus" because of
his "thesis"!)

There's one I never thought of.

Wow. So you might be in the market for a (U.S.S.) Monitor as the Minotaur, eh?

Fantastic worlds await you!

(Gee, this is like making balloon animals as party favors--actually I wish I could make balloon
animals this easily. That would be a useful skill!)

Ahem. On another tangent, gushing about "A Solar Labyrinth" must be tempered by noting the
very creepy ending. Or so it seems to me.

=mantis=

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 18 Apr 2002, 15:43 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Mantically speaking,

Wow. So you might be in the market for a (U.S.S.) Monitor as the Minotaur, eh?

More plausible than you might think. The famous Civil War ironclad battle was not, as often reported between the Monitor and the Merrimac, but between the USS Monitor and a scuttled Federal ship whose name had been Merrimack -- with a K -- that had been converted into the CSS Virginia.

Virginia. Land of virgins. And who were the Young Man trying to rescue? H'mmmm...

--That Annoying Cockroach

Andrew Bollen — 18 Apr 2002, 16:09 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

----- Original Message -----

From: "Dan'I Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>

More plausible than you might think. The famous Civil War ironclad battle was not, as often reported between the Monitor and the Merrimac, but between the USS Monitor and a scuttled Federal ship whose name had been Merrimack -- with a K -- that had been converted into the CSS Virginia.

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Here's a half-baked reading of this story. I take it as very pertinent to Jonas, and perhaps Serverian reading it to him is the final straw in Jonas' desperation to escape.

Maybe Jonas is the "son", constructed of dream-stuff - a poetic description of a robot (the abrupt manner in which the son appears is suggestive perhaps of a robot activating). The fairytale is a dim remembrance of an expedition against some alien power oppressing earth in the early space-faring days of a previous civilization, perhaps not too far distant from our own time. The alien power one assumes is the origin of Abaia. The watery labyrinth corresponds perhaps to some hyperspatial analog, in which space-farers easily lose themselves. It is said somewhere that ships often became lost in the depths of space over long periods.

Perhaps the "dream son" is generic - robots as commanders of the vessels, more likely to remain reliable & operative over long missions.

Certainly Jonas' ship must have become lost - it cannot be that they intentionally delayed their return for aeons, because of course there would be no reason to suppose the existence of a port to welcome their return, or indeed the existence of anything in particular on Earth so far in the

future.

I have an even more half-baked theory that American elements in the Brown Book tales are intended (by Wolfe) as chronological markers - so this story, with Civil War resonances, occurs later than the story of Frog, which is kind of colonial. The "classical" motifs tell us the type of story - Romulus & Remus in "Frog" marks the founding of an empire; Theseus & the Minotaur in "Student" for the rise of a new power against the established order (Athens against the Minoan empire).

Michael Andre-Driussi — 18 Apr 2002, 16:31 · follows Andrew Bollen

Blattid quoted and wrote:

Wow. So you might be in the market for a (U.S.S.) Monitor as the Minotaur, eh?

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Virginia. Land of virgins. And who were the Young Man trying to rescue? H'mmmm...

Ah come on, blattid--I =wrote= that essay (published 9 years ago, fwiw), and now you're just spoiling all the fun for Jerry Friedman's voyage of discovery!

I am not kidding: there is a world of wonder in just examining the stories from the brown book.

=mantis=

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<http://www.siriusfiction.com/>

Andrew Bollen — 18 Apr 2002, 16:52 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

----- Original Message -----

From: "Michael Andre-Driussi" <mantis at siriusfiction.com>

I am not kidding: there is a world of wonder in just examining the stories from the brown book.

Parallels maybe between the Brown Book stories (plus the other "fairy stories") and the story told by "Loyal to the Group of 17". In both cases, narratives constructed from "recycled", formulaic components (myths and slogans), in the absence of language to express them directly ...

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 18 Apr 2002, 17:12 · follows Andrew Bollen

Ah come on, blattid--I =wrote= that essay (published 9 years ago, fwiw), and now you're just spoiling all the fun for Jerry Friedman's voyage of discovery!

I am not kidding: there is a world of wonder in just examining the stories from the brown book.

Huh? Don't know the essay in question. I suppose I really ought to get hold of the Lexicon some time ... I was just following up (albeit in an indirect way) on my thought about the "Brown Book" tales being kin to Jesus' parables. Which, btw, I think Andrew's reading continues very neatly.

Jerry Friedman — 18 Apr 2002, 17:42 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

--- Andrew Bollen <abollen at cybercityhk.com> wrote:

[A little thread splicing for a combined reply]

----- Original Message -----Blattid quoted and wrote:

Wow. So you might be in the market for a (U.S.S.) Monitor as the Minotaur, eh?

More plausible than you might think. The famous Civil War ironclad

----- This message has been truncated, as it exceeded the maximum size of 0k as specified by the system administrator. The sender of this message has been notified of the problem.
