

Tony's Ellis Island

The Urth list — 7 messages, 3 voices, 24 Apr 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3197>

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 24 Apr 2002, 13:29

Tony Ellis wrote:

Remarkable similarity of form to, and ability to interbreed with, human beings, you mean? The explanation is that abos -are- human beings. They are the descendants of prehistoric colonists from Earth. Wolfe goes out of his way to prime us with this idea in all three novellas in 5HC, and that's good enough for me.

When you write "prehistoric," do you mean "from Gondwanaland"? If so, the adjective form is "Gondwanan"; this might help telegraph your position with greater precision. If you don't mean "Gondwanan," then I'm not at all sure what you are referring to.

=mantis=

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Tony Ellis — 24 Apr 2002, 17:25 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Mantis wrote:

When you write "prehistoric," do you mean "from Gondwanaland"? If so, the adjective form is "Gondwanan"; this might help telegraph your position with greater precision. If you don't mean "Gondwanan," then I'm not at all sure what you are referring to.

I mean "from the period of humanity's development predating recorded history." 5000BC or older, I suppose. Not "predating recent Annese colonial history" if that's what you thought.

Gondwanaland is never mentioned in isolation in the novellas, but always in the same breath as Atlantis, Africa, Mu, and other places quite separate in terms of geography and the time at which they existed or are supposed to have existed. Since it is never established which, if any, of these is the home the ancient colonists came from, picking the one with the most scientific name isn't really being any more precise.

Michael Andre-Driussi — 24 Apr 2002, 18:54 · follows Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis wrote:

Gondwanaland is never mentioned in isolation in the novellas, but always in the same breath as Atlantis, Africa, Mu, and other places quite separate in terms of geography and the time at which they existed or are supposed to have existed. Since it is never established which, if any, of these is the home the ancient colonists came from, picking the one with the most scientific name isn't really being any more precise.

Well no, "scientific name" isn't what I'm looking at--it is the "date stamp" that each one carries.

Granted, the list which you allude to is a mixed bag of real and legendary places. But it seems to me that each, even the legendary ones, has a date associated with it.

Basically I wonder how your reading has accomodated Gondwanaland. There must be a hundred ways, or at least a few dozen. Rather than I list a few, I would rather you just tell me.

Your message above suggests you are looking at/for a single wave of colonization? Another interesting datapoint in reconstructing the mosaic of your personal reading.

=mantis=

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Tony Ellis — 25 Apr 2002, 13:29 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Mantis wrote:

Basically I wonder how your reading has accomodated Gondwanaland. There must be a hundred ways, or at least a few dozen. Rather than I list a few, I would rather you just tell me.

My reading is that at some era predating all known civilisations on Earth, a (now long-dead) civilisation arose on Earth that developed space travel, colonised St Anne, and became the 'abos'. Gondwanaland is one place, among others, where that civilisation may have arisen.

And that's it. I don't think we're given enough information to draw any further conclusions, so I don't try. I don't think we're meant to read anything into the specific names given or into any dates that can be attached to them, they're just another way of saying "On Earth, a very long time ago."

Your message above suggests you are looking at/for a single wave of colonization?

A single (pre 5000BC) wave is all that is needed to get a human race on St Anne that can one day interbreed with French colonists, so yes. Except.

Except that the Old Wise One does say that "it may be that all are one stock" - in other words, as I understand it, that the Shadow Children may be humans too. This would require an even earlier wave of colonisation from Earth, or perhaps prion's theory that St Anne is where humanity originated. The trouble is, making the Shadow Children human contradicts the picture painstakingly painted throughout the rest of the story of a non-sentient, indigenous, telepathic life-form that is awakened to sentience by man's arrival. "'We had no names before men came out of the sky,' the Old Wise One said dreamily. 'We were mostly long, and lived in holes between the roots of trees.'"

Never able to reconcile "it may be that all are one stock" with the rest of the story, I've reluctantly assumed that this is just idle speculation on the Old Wise One's part. But I keep trying.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 25 Apr 2002, 15:17 · follows Tony Ellis

Tony Ellis wrote:

My reading is that at some era predating all known civilisations on Earth, a (now long-dead) civilisation arose on Earth that developed space travel, colonised St Anne, and became the 'abos'. Gondwanaland is one place, among others, where that civilisation may have arisen.

H'mmmm. While interesting, this ignores two things.

First, that all the names in the list are of mythical or fictional places. (Yes, I know: Gondwanaland is a geological hypothesis. And I say, and believe Wolfe would say, that this is just another kind of mythical or fictional place.)

Second, that all the names in question were coined in the last three thousand years or so.

Okay, you can fudge the latter by supposing that the OWO doesn't actually say "Atlantis" but the real Atlantean name for Atlantis -- or whatever ... though this doesn't help with (for example) "Poictesme," which was the invention of a specific human being (James Branch Cabell) in the early Twentieth Century and not a "myth" in the sense of, say, Atlantis at all.

One could, of course, postulate that the Shadow Children, or perhaps the abos, came from all these places -- that there were repeated waves of migration, running from the time of Gondwanaland right up to medieval France (which is the locus of Poictesme); somehow this just doesn't seem right.

This is an example of my "Why does VRT tell this story?" question. Frankly, there's no way I can believe that, if it's a true story, the OWW actually used those names. VRT uses names that mean something to him. So (first) why does he use those particular names, why does he suggest that the original home of the abos (or perhaps the Shadow children) is mythical? And (second) how much else in "A Story" is such VRT-added detail? Alternatively: how much of "A Story" is fictional?" I believe I have established right here that some is; there is thus a greater-than-zero lower limit. Is there an upper limit short of "he made the whole thing up?" What, if anything, in "A Story" can we consider verified or verifiable, within the context of the whole 5HC?

Tony, I'm sorry, I don't think we can reasonably assume that it's all basically true. Not just in niggling little details like that; it just doesn't fit Wolfe's general pattern for "A Story" to be fully true -- or fully false. Wolfe's concern with the frame of narration isn't just a personal quirk; it's fundamental to the way Wolfe approaches narrative. Every story is told by someone for some reason. Example: Severian (at least in tBotNS) is writing his official Autarchial memoir; we must assume, even though he is so often self-critical, that he will tend to justify himself. Latro is not writing for a future audience, but to create for himself a kind of substitute for the continuity from day to day he has lost, and will write what he thinks he needs to remember, not what makes a connected narrative. Horn writes (tBotLS) to persuade everyone that Silk is the Good Man, and so his accounts of Silk's goodness has to be taken with a small grain of salt. Etc., etc., etc.

This flies flagrantly in the face of the usual SF convention of a neutral narrator. Even first-person narrators in SF are usually presumed to relate events more or less as they actually saw them. Wolfe is saying, in effect, "Nobody ever does that," and his fictions give us example after example of who give us what they need us to hear instead of what we, perhaps, think we need to hear; but we, if not cautious, think we've heard what we need to hear.

This may seem a belaboring of the point that "Gene Wolfe uses unreliable narrators," but it isn't. It's saying, rather, that Wolfe's narrators can be relied upon, but not for a

straightforward factual account; and it places directly in your court, or the court of anyone who wishes to say (as you did on Tuesday) that "all of 'A Story' should be taken literally," the question of _why_ we should consider VRT in this account any more literal than any other Wolfe narrator?

Some thoughts on the telling, if not its reasons: I think it reasonable to suppose (as you suggest) that VRT is retelling some "lore and stories passed onto him by his Annese mother." But why? Even if we accept your idea that he's telling them to please himself, what about such a story would most please him? We don't even actually know whether he wrote it in his cell -- it is equally plausible to suppose that this was part of the anthropological work he was doing for the University. (Clearly the University places _some_ value on him, or his work; we learn near the end of part 3 that someone at the University is agitating for his release.) Could "A Story" in fact be his major publication prior to his arrest? And, if so, was gaining position at the University -- recall his failure at the University on Ste-Anne -- (one of) his motivation(s) in writing it?

Dismissing it as a story told to please himself and scratch an anthropological itch, while simultaneously assuming that it's a literally true story, is just, well, too simple. In my opinion.

--Dan'l

Michael Andre-Driussi — 25 Apr 2002, 16:34 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Tony Ellis wrote:

My reading is that at some era predating all known civilisations on Earth, a (now long-dead) civilisation arose on Earth that developed space travel, colonised St Anne, and became the 'abos'. Gondwanaland is one place, among others, where that civilisation may have arisen.

And that's it. I don't think we're given enough information to draw any further conclusions, so I don't try. I don't think we're meant to read anything into the specific names given or into any dates that can be attached to them, they're just another way of saying "On Earth, a very long time ago."

Okay, so basically ala Howard's Hyperboria and/or the world of Moorcock's Elric. That is, homo sapiens sapiens from between 125,000 to 5,000 years ago. I can grasp that.

"Mu" (sometimes also known as Lemuria) is a term that was originally scientific (well, "Lemuria" was . . . putting the Roman May festival aside . . .), then picked up by mystics, and then dropped by science. It has to do with Lemurs (the marsupials, not the ghosts), and the distribution/isolation of marsupials from placental mammals (something like 90 million years ago). This "waves of colonization/isolation" and evolutionary competition plays very well with a few of the themes in 5HC. (For example, the struggle between the Annese and the recent people from Earth might look like marsupials vs. placental mammals.)

Gondwanaland hasn't been "mysticized," to the best of my knowledge, and represents a period so far in the past (circa 300 million years ago) that it predates mammals. And that is what makes it a different one in the list--there is nothing fuzzy about it.

Because it is lumped together with places that are obviously myths and legends, one might suspect that the students and/or Wolfe were casting the supercontinent as a "myth" of the evolutionists. Yet this is clearly not the case, since the three novellas are almost fervently pro-evolution: the mysteries of evolution provide a great depth to the drama.

So it is much better to see the use of the term Gondwanda as being childish pretense for "on

Earth, a very long time ago."

To take the term literally means to consider pseudo-science notions of either homo sapiens sapiens evolving on Earth before mammals ("cavemen and dinosaurs" material, with the humans subsequently dying off and evolving/emerging again 300 million years later), or extra-solar homo sapiens sapiens arriving on Earth before mammals (and then dying off, rather like the Norse colonies in Greenland). Either one threatens evolutionary theory: the first because there is no fossil record suggesting it is even remotely possible; the second because it transplants the entire "human evolution" model with an outside source, making human evolution as we know it a lie, a picture from a jigsaw puzzle where the crucial pieces are all in another box all together. Again, because the novellas are so pro-evolution, these options represent quite a twist.

I wouldn't want to argue "extra-terrestrial humans colonized Earth" as the Official Strong Case, but I do think it amounts to an Official Weak Case. The text seems to allow for it, but yes, it puts a further twist on things far more tangential than, for example, the twist of having VRT write "A Story," which is really quite central to my appreciation of the book as a whole (because it unambiguously changes the entire framing context of "A Story," turning a simple romance into a complex tangle of history/autobiography/confession).

Except that the Old Wise One does say that "it may be that all are one stock" - in other words, as I understand it, that the Shadow Children may be humans too. This would require an even earlier wave of colonisation from Earth, or perhaps prion's theory that St Anne is where humanity originated. The trouble is, making the Shadow Children human contradicts the picture painstakingly painted throughout the rest of the story of a non-sentient, indigenous, telepathic life-form that is awakened to sentience by man's arrival. "'We had no names before men came out of the sky,' the Old Wise One said dreamily. 'We were mostly long, and lived in holes between the roots of trees.'"

This detail from the text reminds me of the weird Edenic world at the end of Wolfe's online story "Copperhead," as well as Lotus Land, and Jack Vance's alien race of Star Kings (from novel THE STAR KING) and their weird Edenic world.

=mantis=

Tony Ellis — 26 Apr 2002, 11:17 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Dan'I wrote:
H'mmmm. While interesting, this ignores two things.

First, that all the names in the list are of mythical or fictional places.

Only if you ignore something yourself: the not-insubstantial continent of Africa, which is also in the list the Old Wise One gives.

Second, that all the names in question were coined in the last three thousand years or so.

The Old Wise One has pulled these names out of the minds of passing starship crews. Check out the speech preceding the list of names, which begins "We came here either recently or a long, long time ago." He says that when the Shadow Children try to remember the name of 'their' home, they "hear also the mind-singing", ie pick up the thoughts of, passing starship crews, and "these thoughts come into our songs." The next sentence is the list of names.

So. The Shadow Children know that 'their' home is somewhere long ago and far away. They find

some pretty names for places long ago and far away in the minds of passing starship crews that seem to strike a chord, so these are the ones they come up with.

.it places directly in your court, or the court
of anyone who wishes to say (as you did on Tuesday)that "all of 'A
Story' should be taken literally," the question of _why_ we should
consider VRT in this account any more literal than any other Wolfe
narrator?

Because, m'lud, VRT isn't telling his own story.

We can suspect the narratives of Latro and Severian, because it is the story of their own lives that they are telling. They have a vested interest. Horn may or may not have fibbed in TBOTLS, but it is in TBOTSS, where he is telling his own story, that Wolfe makes it blindingly obvious that he is editing the truth.

It is in 'V.R.T.' that Victor tells his own story, it is there that he actually plays the role of a Wolfe narrator, and it is there, sure enough, that he lies like a trooper. But in 'A Story' he doesn't have the Wolfe narrator's motivation to lie, because he isn't telling his own story. Telling the story of Sandwalker falsely won't get him out of gaol, and we have no reason in any case to believe that it was written with his gaolers in mind.

Something that reinforces my belief is the fact that when his narratives are suspect, Wolfe makes this quite obvious. Horn and the narrator of Seven American Nights openly confess to lying. In 'V.R.T.' we have whopping great big clues like a change of handwriting. But there's nothing internal to 'A Story' to suggest that it is unreliable (that I'm aware of), and externally, in the other novellas, we get the confirmation of many places and events, suggesting that, instead, we should view this as a story that really happened.