

Black Easter

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Robert Borski — 08 May 2002, 04:41

Last of my posts on Wolfe's superlative "Seven American Nights."

Both Joan Gordon and Kathryn Locey, in their analyses of "Seven American Nights," are able to find elements of hope and resurrection in the story, but I think this is a total misread. More to the point, although it takes place in the week preceding Easter, I believe "Seven American Nights" is about as far from a prelude to the spiritual or physical revitalization of America as it is possible to get, being rather a symbolic descent into Hell (a trope that is inordinately common in Wolfe's work, both long and short), if not the Anti-Parousia itself.

Let us begin with what is always a good place to start when attempting to render sense of Wolfe: onomastics.

While seeming a plausible Arab name, "Nadan," in fact, is something you would be ill-mannered in calling anyone. In Farsi it means "stupid, idiot;" therefore, by extension, the same thing that 'cretin' does. (I speak here, of course, less of the medical condition than its use as a pejorative, though both are related.) "Cretin" itself is an interesting word, deriving from the Franco-Provençal, "creitin, crestin: human being, lit. Christian, hence one who is human despite deformities." And throughout "Seven American Nights" we see a veritable horde of deformed creitins. But given that another prominent character is named Kreton--in actuality, he's the actor Bobby O' Keene, who plays Gore Vidal's "morally retarded" alien in the stage production of "Visit to a Small Planet"; Nadan, however, is unable to think of him as anything but Kreton)--it's almost certain we're meant to see him as Nadan's alter ego. Kreton, like so many lupine characters, limps, the result of a recent stage injury; plus in the theater company's next production he will play Mephistopheles, so it's very difficult not to see him as a devil figure. (A limp is frequently associated with the devil.)

Then there's the hallucinogen that Nadan doses his candy eggs with. Though it's never actually named, it is almost certainly LSD--a synthetic derivative of the psychoactive chemical found in ergot, a fungus of rye and other cereal grains. This plays off the potent grain imagery found throughout "Seven American Nights." There's Golan Gasseem, the grain merchant who may be a known dealer in stolen artifacts (and hence this is why Nadan must avoid him--out of fear he too may be thought a dealer. It's also possible there's class rivalry here. Gasseem is a merchant, while Nadan may be a member of royalty--Mirza, the name of Nadan's uncle, means "prince"); Nadan's dream of "bread that retained the fragrance of the oven...though it was smeared with gray mold"; and the wheat penny, which is now a necklace gewgaw. Writes Locey about the bread loaf, and with which I wholeheartedly agree, "This contaminated bread, symbolic of an America which has prized effect over substance, is the antithesis of communion bread, in which Catholics 'see' the presence of Christ." The LSD thus becomes a substitute host, a black Eucharist taken by devilish Nadan.

Further evidence that the devil is about to rise transcendent over Christ can be found in the scene where Nadan witnesses a Good Friday procession involving the Stations of the Cross.

(Gordon posits this is actually Easter Day, but Locey gets the chronology right). Yet its followers are "inattentive" and "bickering," and watch the ceremony "as uncomprehendingly as they might if they themselves were only travelers abroad." Hardly the attitude you would expect from Catholics on this most solemn day of the Christian calendar, and once more indicative of America's fall from grace.

Nor do I buy Gordon's argument that the rebirth of the theater signifies an incipient renaissance. Both plays being produced are neither of a religious or patriotic nature. "Visit to a Smart Planet" features an extraterrestrial "cretin," while the title character in "Mary Rose" disappears for 25 years, but when she reappears has not aged--associating her with the preservative-laden bread that still smells fresh, but is moldy.

So, to recapitulate: Nadan, having taken the black host on Good Friday, the day of Christ's death, sees both fallen angel (peri Ardis) and demon (werwolf Ardis) even as Mephistophelean Kreton, in his twisted black shoes, causes an earthquake, and thunder sounds.

The Devil has risen.

Robert Borski