

Quetzal On Urth? (responding to Charles' arguments)

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 26 Nov 2002

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James Wynn — 26 Nov 2002, 16:43

Charles Reed posted:

Last week, Crush posited the following:

... even if Typhon did not know the target planets were full of blood-sucking monsters (and I never imagined he did) it does not mean he wasn't manipulated by Quetzal on Urth. And based on Quetzal's statements in LS3:1 (Slaves of Scylla) that still seems probable to me.

I guess the idea of Quetzal being on board the Whorl from the beginning bugs me more than it should. There are other theories floating around that I don't agree with but that I can stomach because they at least seem to be within the realm of possibility because their positions can be argued from the *text*. Examples of such theories include the Blue = Ushas theory, and the theory that it was Severian who appeared to Horn in the pit.

But the Quetzal-on-board-from-the-beginning theory is different.

I see how the text doesn't refute such a possibility -- and I've looked for something to refute it with -- but that's not the same thing as support.

Crush responds to Charles:

Ok. Two points...no...three.

First, when did we out-law ranting on this list?

Second, I assert that my arguments -- that Quetzal was on Urth and manipulated Typhon to start the Whorl project -- is textually supported. Quetzal is *clearly* (clear to me anyway) identifying himself with the cobra in the A-man/Wo-man story (the story is in the Chrasnological Writings btw). He could not have enticed A-man and Wo-man into his tree from Green (as far as I can see). Therefore he had to be on Urth. This is textual evidence.

I've no reason to believe (yet) there was a colony of inhumi on Urth or any more than one. I have thematic reasons to doubt there was.

Furthermore, if, as Wolfe said, Typhon did not know about the inhumi, then neither he nor his scientists had ever been to Green. This seems reasonable from the way the Plan played out. So he sent this massive project to a star system without reconnaissance - no recon by mirrors nor by the sort of ship Severian rode in. That's faith, man. What reason did he have to believe there were inhabitable planets there? My explanation is that he was assured that there were hospitable planets by Quetzal. That's not textual evidence, but it's not extra-textual either. It's just making sense of the narrative. Perfectly fair.

Third, I wish to defend the tact of analyzing literature from extra-textual clues. You have

pointed out that we frequently base theories on Wolfe's works on extra-textual clues (Catholicism, etc.). Frequently, entire theories are dispensed with by saying "Wolfe wouldn't do that." That is not unreasonable as far as that goes. Furthermore...

--- If an extra-textual source is found to so closely relate to the narrative that it could not be coincidental,

--- And if a character is found ****standing in the very place of an entity of that extra-textual narrative***,

--- And if someone says, "Even though I wouldn't have said this otherwise, this character is clearly a type of this extra-textual entity..."

Well that is NOT reading off the text. That's reading FROM the text.

FOR EXAMPLE, does Silk see events from the life of Jesus Christ during his enlightenment? I'd say yes. I think most people would say yes. But the only way you would know that is if you were ***extra-textually*** familiar with the events of the life of Christ. Based (partially) on this, many say that the Outsider is God. Yet, Jesus Christ is NOT mentioned in the text. If someone were not familiar with the details of the life of Christ, and not aware that Wolfe is a Christian, it would NOT be self-evident to that person that Jesus is referred to. Yet, it still would be TEXTUALLY self-evident. There are other equally obvious references to someone that arrives at the text with certain background knowledge. To those that do not have that background knowledge, the most likely initial response will be, "Wolfe is simply not that clever. No one is that clever." This is the thought that goes through my mind all the time when reading the LS/SS cycle.

And that's what I've got to say about that.

Still ranting,
Crush

Charles Reed — 26 Nov 2002, 22:10 · follows James Wynn

I like this back-and-forth stuff. It helps me to think better. This is kind-of long, so let's go:

James Wynn wrote:

Ok. Two points...no...three.

First, when did we out-law ranting on this list?

Point taken. From now on I'll feel free to rant away. :-)

Second, I assert that my arguments -- that Quetzal was on Urth and manipulated Typhon to start the Whorl project -- is textually supported.

Quetzal is ***clearly*** (clear to me anyway) identifying himself with the cobra in the A-man/Wo-man story (the story is in the Chasmological Writings btw).

He could not have enticed A-man and Wo-man into his tree from Green (as far as I can see). Therefore he had to be on Urth. This is textual evidence.

Well, I don't see it that way, though I'll grant that this is a matter of interpretation. Quetzal identifies himself with the cobra in the sense that he's trying to lure A-man and Wo-man from the garden (the Whorl) up into his tree (Green) by doing everything possible to carry out the Plan of Pas. My interpretation differs from yours in that you see Urth, rather than the Whorl, as "the garden." Each interpretation's validity depends on the point of view. Yours is valid if Quetzal was on Urth, which I do not believe him to have been.

I've no reason to believe (yet) there was a colony of inhumis on Urth or any more than one. I have thematic reasons to doubt there was.

Furthermore, if, as Wolfe said, Typhon did not know about the inhumi, then neither he nor his scientists had ever been to Green. This seems reasonable from the way the Plan played out. So he sent this massive project to a star system without reconnaissance - no recon by mirrors nor by the sort of ship Severian rode in. That's faith, man. What reason did he have to believe there were inhabitable planets there? My explanation is that he was assured that there were hospitable planets by Quetzal. That's not textual evidence, but it's not extra-textual either. It's just making sense of the narrative. Perfectly fair.

Yes, it's fair, but I don't see what other supporting evidence there is. I also think there are other explanations that make far more sense. Two of which are as follows:

(1) There are apparently lots of "aliens" on Urth in Severian's time and I would presume that there were lots of aliens on Urth during Typhon's time as well, and perhaps even other humans from other systems that aren't under the "space-travel quarantine" that Urth is under. Typhon no doubt would have ways of gathering information he wanted (such as star charts of other inhabitable systems) from such interstellar travelers. No need at all for Quetzal to show up on Urth.

(2) There is already a tenuous connection between Blue and Urth (as different planets) in the form of Abaia, Scylla, and the other giant (and not so giant) underwater creatures. In SotT, Severian remarks that Abaia was "carried [to Urth] from the farther shores of the universe in anteglacial days." And in RttW, the Greater Scylla of Urth teaches Horn/Silk how to communicate with the Mother of Blue. Some might see this as evidence that Urth=Blue, but I don't, due to (among other things) the comment about Abaia coming to Urth from somewhere else.

That is, I see it as evidence that the Greater Scylla's race was brought to Urth from another planet -- perhaps from Blue but not necessarily. This means that Typhon could have learned of the Blue/Green system from these sea creatures. I think there are other implications here too, which I haven't really thought out very well, regarding Typhon's relationship with these beings. In any case, this is another explanation (supportable strictly by the text) in which there is no need to have Quetzal show up on Urth.

Explanation #1 has the advantage of being the easiest and the most logical. It has the disadvantage of being a little boring.

Explanation #2 has the advantage of being quite provocative in its implications without calling for the need for something extremely far-fetched, such as Quetzal being on Urth. It has disadvantage of not adhering to Occam's Razor, but I don't consider that such a severe disadvantage.

Of course, the two explanations could be combined. Typhon could have learned from "other aliens" where the giant sea creatures originally came from, and sent his starcrosser to that place once he confirmed its habitability.

Third, I wish to defend the tact of analyzing literature from extra-textual clues. You have pointed out that we frequently base theories on Wolfe's works on extra-textual clues (Catholicism, etc.). Frequently, entire theories are dispensed with by saying "Wolfe wouldn't do that."

I wasn't attacking such tactics; I was merely stating that my first preference is to argue from the text itself. It feels like "cheating" to do otherwise.

But as far as basing/dispensing theories on the "Wolfe wouldn't do that" argument -- I think this is extremely dangerous. Just this week, there was an exchange in which Don Doggett stated, "I cannot believe that Wolfe would have his main character commit incest, knowingly or unknowingly, and especially without any good reason" and outlined a theory for why he didn't think Dorcas was Severian's grandmother. Marc Aramani then replied, in what I thought was really good argument which summarized the various sexual relationships in the NS books, that it was in fact essential to his interpretation that Dorcas be Severian's grandmother. "Wolfe wouldn't do that" is simply a bad way to argue a point.

Wolfe is a Roman Catholic, and that can be used to a certain degree -- but ONLY to a certain degree -- in interpreting what his characters would or would not do.

That is not unreasonable as far as that goes. Furthermore...

--- If an extra-textual source is found to so closely relate to the narrative that it could not be coincidental,
--- And if a character is found ****standing in the very place of an entity of that extra-textual narrative***,
--- And if someone says, "Even though I wouldn't have said this otherwise, this character is clearly a type of this extra-textual entity..."

Well that is NOT reading off the text. That's reading FROM the text.

Consider this. Severian is a Christian figure. He died and was brought back to life. He turned water into wine. He healed the sick with a touch of his hand. He raised the dead. These are definitely non-superficial similarities. But was Severian's story a retelling of the Christ story? No. Clearly no. Severian is not Christ. Just because there are similarities -- even non-superficial similarities -- does not mean that Wolfe is writing an allegory in which everything stands for something else in an already-told story.

FOR EXAMPLE, does Silk see events from the life of Jesus Christ during his enlightenment? I'd say yes. I think most people would say yes. But the only way you would know that is if you were ***extra-textually*** familiar with the events of the life of Christ.

You're correct, and that's why strict "formalism" ultimately fails in interpreting literature. It is, however, the starting point for interpreting literature.

Based (partially) on this, many say that the Outsider is God. Yet, Jesus Christ is NOT mentioned in the text.

It is, however, stated in the "Gods, Persons, and Animals Mentioned in the Text" of EXODUS that the Outsider is the "god of gods."

If someone were not familiar with the details of the life of Christ, and not aware that Wolfe is a Christian, it would NOT be self-evident to that person that Jesus is referred to.

That's true, and it's also not necessary to the understanding of the story. There are images seen in the Silk's enlightenment that might not be understood by a Christian-ignorant person. Heck, there are scenes of his enlightenment that I don't necessarily understand. That's all right, though. Allusion ***enhances*** the work and provides the reader with perhaps a greater depth of understanding, but if the reader **MUST** understand the allusions in order to understand the story, then the story isn't really a story -- it's an allegory. That's not what the NS/LS/SS books are, though. At least, that's not how I see them. Even if a person knew absolutely nothing about the life of Jesus, it would still be (grasping for adverbs) munificently clear **FROM THE TEXT** that Silk views the Outsider as the only god worthy of being worshiped, and that's the important

part.

Yet, it still would be TEXTUALLY self-evident. There are other equally obvious references to someone that arrives at the text with certain background knowledge. To those that do not have that background knowledge, the most likely initial response will be, "Wolfe is simply not that clever. No one is that clever." This is the thought that goes through my mind all the time when reading the LS/SS cycle.

And that's what I've got to say about that.

Still ranting,
Crush

Here's the problem that I have with some of your ideas. You seem to think that just because the LS/SS story bears some non-superficial resemblance to certain Greek myths, the entire LS/SS story has to be a strict re-telling of those myths. I think that's false. The myths can enhance, illuminate, and even explicate the story to some degree but you cannot insist that the story has to be viewed through the lens of the myths. To do so, I think, is to sell the story short -- to rob it of its natural power and turn it into a game in which you wind up interpreting the story to fit the myth, rather than working to interpret the story on its own grounds first and then seeing how the myth might further illuminate it.

Well. That's it for now. Keep ranting, Crush. I'm looking forward to your response, because even if I don't agree you, you make me think.

Charles

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 26 Nov 2002, 22:24 · follows Charles Reed

A few teensy points.

Charles Reed wrote:
[...] as far as basing/dispensing theories on the "Wolfe wouldn't do that" argument -- I think this is extremely dangerous [...]
Wolfe is a Roman Catholic, and that can be used to a certain degree -- but ONLY to a certain degree -- in interpreting what his characters would or would not do.

Actually, this statement makes almost the same error that led to "Wolfe wouldn't have his protagonist commit incest."

In fact, Mr Wolfe's religion serves as a clue, not to what he might have his characters do, but to what it would mean if he did -- more generally, to how he constructs meaning through the various bits of his texts: settings, situations, characters, actions, even style, etc.

Earlier, Crush wrote:
Based (partially) on this, many say that the Outsider is God. Yet, Jesus Christ is NOT mentioned in the text.

I beg to differ. None of the "Sun" texts, so far as I can recall, mentions the name of Jesus Christ is not. However, Silk mentions a man "both possessed and enlightened by the Outsider" who winds up crucified.

Jeff Veyera — 27 Nov 2002, 01:32 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

: Second, I assert that my arguments -- that Quetzal was on Urth and manipulated Typhon to start the Whorl project -- is textually supported. Quetzal is *clearly* (clear to me anyway)

identifying himself with the cobra in the A-man/Wo-man story (the story is in the Chrasmological Writings btw). He could not have enticed A-man and Wo-man into his tree from Green (as far as I can see). Therefore he had to be on Urth. This is textual evidence.:

Sure, it's in the text, but we're arguing meaning, not existence. Could it not be that Quetzal mentioned it because he felt like the snake in Viron, luring the Vironese to the tree (Green) so that they could be fed upon? This seems to be less of a leap than Quetzal as the mastermind of the Whorl.

:Furthermore, if, as Wolfe said, Typhon did not know about the inhumi, then neither he nor his scientists had ever been to Green. This seems reasonable from the way the Plan played out. So he sent this massive project to a star system without reconnaissance - no recon by mirrors nor by the sort of ship Severian rode in. That's faith, man. What reason did he have to believe there were inhabitable planets there? My explanation is that he was assured that there were hospitable planets by Quetzal. That's not textual evidence, but it's not extra-textual either. It's just making sense of the narrative. Perfectly fair.:

Again, Occam's Razor applies. There WAS an earlier interstellar empire, was there not? Could Typhon have learned of Blue and Green from his excavations? I seem to recall a reference to the mines of Saltus containing a vast amount of artifacts from the earlier civilization---might a star map be one of them?

No ranting, just wondering.

Teflon