

Janus, Juturna and the reconciliation with Ocean

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 24 Dec 2002

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Andrew Bollen — 24 Dec 2002, 03:56

Chris wrote:

IMHO, there is never a problem of not having enough clues; the problem is, rather, that the given set of clues can produce a nearly infinite number of internally consistent hypotheses.

[snippety]

The second possibility is to, as a reader, come up with a reading of the text that is as aesthetically pleasing (to you) as you can. In this sense we are in some way pushing each other to come up with more beautiful interpretations in consistency, form, and symmetry among other things - and in this context, what the author *meant* has little if anything to do with matters. One can look for the simplest explanation, but depending on your taste this won't always be the best.

[snip snip]

I can't speak for anyone else, but I tend to look at things from the second perspective, which lends itself well to tolerance of many different interpretations.

Me too! Wolfe places demands on readers to do much of the story-telling themselves; I like this, and I'm quite happy not to have a "definitive" auctorial reading available. (On the other hand, if Wolfe *did* intend definitive readings for all the various narrative points under discussion, then he obviously failed to give enough information. I think enough smart people have looked closely enough at the text, for long enough, to warrant such an assertion.)

Looking for the "simplest" explanation is rarely the best way to approach Wolfe. The explanation with the greatest "poetic meaning" is probably the most appropriate, as was said of Robert Graves. I agree with Crush on this, I think: it is fruitful to approach Wolfe with the same "analeptic" mode of enquiry that Graves brought to myths. Concretely, for Graves it was always appropriate to ask questions such as "What song did the sirens sing?"; with Wolfe, I believe, one is expected to ask questions such as, "What song does Seawrack sing?", and to formulate an answer for oneself. I also agree with Crush, I think, in believing that Graves was probably one of Wolfe's specific inspirations, or at least a source of imagery and themes - but even if that's not actually true, Wolfe allows at least enough narrative space, for one to enjoyably approach the text from that direction.

Anyway, my idiosyncratic reading goes like this:

The powers in the sea are one of the strongest links between New Sun and Short Sun/Short Sun, but they remain deeply mysterious. We are given to understand that they are inimical, wishing to extend their empire to the land (on Urth), and a strong component of the forces arrayed

against the New Sun. (Juturna, the undine who saved Severian at the very beginning of the cycle, tells us in UOTNS that the powers wished only to "tame" humanity, but surely there is little difference between "taming" and "enslaving".)

And yet both Severian and SilkHorn are beloved in one way or another by these powers. It is valid to ask the question, "Why?", and expect to find an answer. These powers are not bound completely by time, so the answer need not be.

I think SilkHorn performed a reconciliation with these powers, by his grace towards their acolyte, Scylla; and possibly by the action of the Mother and the Vanishing People. Through this reconciliation, a new relationship between man and Ocean is established: respect, but do not worship (as SilkHorn puts it, I believe in his wedding sermon or at any rate towards the end of RTTW) - in contrast to the old choices, worship or abominate.

I see in this a serious effort by Wolfe to answer Graves' call for abandonment of solar, male dominated theology in favor of a return to a worship of the Mother and her Ocean; No, says Wolfe, but neither is she unclean or horrific.

Dually, one must suppose a similar shift by the powers: respect humans, and do not enslave them.

With this reconciliation, Blue's future is made more secure, and I believe also that Ushas is spared. For with the universal flood, surely Abaia would otherwise be free to dominate the world, and enslave the new race of humans. For me, this remains a major unsolved mystery at the end of the UOTNS; and I think that a major strand running through Short Sun/Long Sun is the resolution of this mystery. SilkHorn's "respect but do not worship" statement **must** be a new development over the theological context of BOTNS, I think. If the powers remain effectively inimical, as they remain throughout BOTNS, then surely "resist, and do not worship" would be the appropriate slogan.

Perhaps the iteration presented in New Sun is not to be thought of as the final refinement of Severian? Perhaps SilkHorn has "changed the story", so that we start again, perhaps with a melded Sev/SilkHorn, and reach a conclusion graced with a New Sun, but also with mankind and Ocean reconciled?

Or perhaps we might think of the "man and woman deposited by a certain ship of the caogens" at the end UOTNS as being SilkHorn and Seawrack (very flimsy, I admit)?

There are specific connections between Severian and SilkHorn pointing both to a deep identification of the two, on some level, and also to this reconciliation.

The connection between Sev and SilkHorn is signified (inter alia) by their connection through Janus. Both Severian and SilkHorn are types of Janus. Janus also signifies the reconciliation, because Janus in at least one account was married to Juturna, the goddess of springs, fountains and pools. It seems clear to me that Janus and his connection to Juturna were on Wolfe's mind; specifically, from at least the time of the writing of UOTNS. For I can think of no other reason for the undine to take the name of such an obscure water goddess.

As to Janus:

- First, Quadrifons. The god of doors, crosswords, "and much else", as RTTW puts it. He is clearly Janus. The earliest depictions of Janus have four faces - Janus Quadrifons. The Olavine scene in

RTTW makes the identification very clear. She carries the key of Janus (part of his standard regalia, along with a sceptre). Passing through the door, one passes beneath Janus' oak. Janus, from at least the time of Fraser, has been recognized as an oak god: his name a form of Dianus, and he is a "rustic Jupiter", as Graves puts it. The pools beyond on the door are to me undoubtedly Juturna's. (I do not discount also the cherub/sphinx connotations in his lion/eagle significations, but see these as "syncretic" to the Janus signification.)

- Both SilkHorn and Severian are "two faced" in the sense they are two personalities in one. Note that Janus was often depicted with a man's face and a woman's, which does well for Severian.

- Apart from his role as god of doorways, Janus was also a "culture hero" - introducing agriculture, money and (something else?). He inaugurated the Golden Age. He resonates with the Odin/Mercury/Gwydion "culture hero" aspect which is very clear in SilkHorn - grain from the sky, giving law to primitive communities, inaugurating a new religious dispensation etc - and also in much of the "earlier" life of Severian as Conciliator. He was the god of new beginnings, and he marked the transitions between old and new in development of civilizations. As a form of Jupiter, the supreme god, he therefore seems well fitted to be a god of whom SilkHorn and Sev are in some sense "avatars" or representatives.

- Severian also carries Janus' great key (in Thrax). And "Terminus Est" - glossed as "This is the line of division" - is an appropriate motto for Janus in his marking of transitions between old & new.

- Quadrifons is especially holy, and his name especially "magical", perhaps because he is dimly remembered as (the god of) the Conciliator.

- "Quadrifons", rather than "Bifrons", in accordance somehow with the general leitmotif of doublings in New Sun/Short Sun; and perhaps speaking directly to an amalgamation of the two "doubles", Sev and SilkHorn?

Chris — 24 Dec 2002, 06:06 · follows Andrew Bollen

Just a couple notes on different subjects, but at least on something less general than before:

I agree that Graves is very helpful in trying to understand Wolfe's work; of course, I also agree with someone else who posted that attempts to jam Wolfe into a... Graves-ian framework, aren't going to work. Comparisons tend to be fruitful, though.

There are also qabbalistic references here and there in his work. I only knew enough, at the time, to make some general inferences which have probably been rehashed here 20 times. However, by coincidence I picked up a commentary of the Sefer Yetzirah (for non-Wolfe-related reasons), and when I finish it I'm hoping those pieces will fall into place.

Also, w.r.t. Abaia and the undersea entities... I felt that their function in the story was largely allegorical- to the point that they may partially (or even entirely) be the invention of Severian (as an author, and aware of the devices of authors) to illustrate a point. Where he uses them, I find that nearly always the water they are submerged under is time/history, and the large entities like Abaia could be compared to the influence of long-dead nations and cultures, and possibly even dominant *ideas*, cast aside but reaching out to extend their largely subconscious influence on the present. One of the most obvious instances (if any are needed, though I suspect everyone's gone well over this by now) is the defeat of Baldanders and the potential of what he could have been: he goes back under the waters, swallowed by time.

Not to say that this is a universal theme applied to all segments in the story, it's just a sub-story alongside the story, I suppose. But I find it an interesting consequence that, from this point of view, the cycle must necessarily end with a flood.

From this way of looking at things, it would follow that while Abaia & co. achieve victory at the

end of a cycle in a sense, they nonetheless are vanquished at that instant where the end of the old cycle gives way to the beginning of the new (though they may be reborn). I am unable to produce any textual evidence whether such an extinction did/did not occur, but I would be interested if anyone knows.

Apologies, by the way, if I have spent a great deal of time re-hashing what everyone has taken for granted/dismissed a long time ago; I haven't seen it in the archives, but I also haven't read them from beginning to end either. I've been babbling on far too much of late.

Chris

Andrew wrote:

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