

The Book of Typhon part one, revised: Severian's true kingship

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Lisa Schaffer-Doggett — 07 Mar 2003, 04:51

Hi everyone, Don here again (not Lisa though I suppose that's appropriate to the gender bending discussions of late :)) Below is what I've been contemplating in my absense. Enjoy!

The Book of Typhon, Part One Revised: Severian as True King

Note: Please delete the body of this essay in any replies, as it is fairly long.

"But it is only fair to warn readers that this remains a very difficult book, as well as a very queer one, to be avoided by anyone with a distracted, tired or rigidly scientific mind."

The preceding quote is from the Foreward of Robert Graves' "The White Goddess" (p. 9) and I have included it because it seems equally to apply to Gene Wolfe's "Sun" series. The two works have a great deal in common and I would venture to say that it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to get a deeper understanding of Wolfe's work without some familiarity with "The White Goddess". But that is another argument and my chief interest in Graves with relation to this work of Wolfe's is in the hiding of things. Things such as Severian's and Silk's true identities, and the role of Typhon in the grand scheme of the work. And though Graves is my inspiration and guide, I have found it is possible to discover these and other mysteries using for the most part only Wolfe. I don't expect that I will convince the unwilling, but I am confident that I have come up with an interpretation of the text that is internally consistent and compelling in the aggregate of circumstantial evidence. But let me get to my argument. It is this; that the "Sun" series, among it's other functions, is a complex dynastic novel which Typhon, far from being a secondary character, permeates in his role as the father of Ymar (and thus Severian) and in his role as Silk, who is Typhon's clone. This part of the essay will deal with Severian's ancestry.

The main stumbling block to my theory is that Severian's parentage is pretty well agreed upon. His mother is Katherine and his father is Ouen, whose mother is Dorcas, making her Severian's grandmother. But is this correct? I believe it isn't. The only certainty is that Dorcas is Ouen's mother. Ouen denies ever impregnating Katherine, and the only evidence that Ouen could be Severian's father is that they look strikingly similar in profile. (Sword and Citadel, p 402). This is hardly compelling. In addition, it is thematically weak. If Dorcas is Severian's grandmother then he is committing incest in a manner that makes no sense mythopoeicly. The incest only makes sense if she is his sister or his mother. Equally, the archetypes clinging to Severian's character point in a different direction. Ouen makes a much stronger adoptive father in the vein of Joseph the carpenter, or Sir Hector, as Severian obviously parallels to an extent both Jesus and Arthur. But the truth is much stranger than this and I will approach it later.

If you accept that Wolfe is using the "King Jesus" model for Severian, which I do, considering the marks of sacred kingship that they both share, the lameness and the facial scar, then the previous are two models for a hidden king. A third involves Vodalus, the liege of leaves, a regular Robin Hood with Hildegrin as his Little John, trying to bring a return to the monarchy, waiting for Richard to return. Which he does, in disguise of course. Severian is a perfect Richard; witness his grand entrance into Vodalus' lair, and I'm reasonably certain that Vodalus

is on to him, much as Robin knows Richard before he is revealed. And, without taking too much liberty, I can carry these thematic parallels a degree deeper: Jesus (at least in King Jesus) is descended from Herod, who Graves takes pains to tie to the god Typhon, Arthur is the son of Uther, another good Typhonic (Urth's Typhon) model, and Richard is the son of Henry who, if you've seen *The Lion in Winter* or given a cursory study to medieval history, you will recognize as Typhon's near twin. And isn't Echidna (wife of Pas/Typhon in LS and wife of Typhon in myth) Eleanor of Aquitaine in simulacrum?

To bolster this thematic argument of a "return of the king" I give you the Autarchs themselves: ". . . the minds he brought to us, which we touch only faintly even now, are not, with one or two exceptions, those of genius. Most are only common men and women, sailors and artisans, farmwives and wantons.

Most of the rest are eccentric second-rate scholars of the sort Thecla used to laugh at." (Sword, p 380) The Autarchs sound very much like stewards to me, placeholders.

The eidolon Malrubius hints at Severian's bloodline as well:

"The animal that rests beside you now would die for you. Of what kind is his attachment to you?"

"The first?" (Shadow, p. 198) by which he is saying "Attachment to the person of the Monarch." In the interest of length I have left out most of the passage (Shadow, pp. 197-8) but it has always seemed cryptic to me and it has occurred to me that it can be read analeptically to hint that "First is the monarchy (Typhon) and you are also the Monarch."

Now admittedly, this is hardly convincing on its own. But the real meat is in the various clues, many of them "pied" (to use Graves term) and all of them out of order in the text of TBotNS. The first clue is *The Tale of the Boy Called Frog*. For economy's sake I'll assume everyone's read it. On the surface it seems to be a story told around Little Severian. Frog is raised by woodcutters and then orphaned and sheltered by the Black Killer (Severian) and the naked one (Apu Punchau). In a very real sense this is the case, but there is more to this. Spring Wind, the father of Frog and Fish, is Typhon, aka Typhoon, which is a spring storm. Wolfe hides this cleverly in two ways: First, the story occurs before Typhon is introduced and second, the name Spring Wind seems Asian in origin and makes the story seem as if it comes from the First Empire. The Black Killer who shelters Frog, is the Torturers Guild, and the Naked One, who has "never had a son of Meschia to teach," is none other than Father Inire who according to the *Lexicon Urthus* is the "vizier to countless Autarchs since Ymar". He occurs as the Naked One in *Sword* and *Citadel* as the bent and masked guide (pp. 350-1). And here we have the answer: Ymar is the bastard son of Typhon, Frog, sheltered by the Black Killer and taught by the Naked One, who rules by the red flower.

Great, so where does Severian fit into this? Jonas tells us. He knows who Severian is, hence the story of the "black beans" (Shadow p.

209) The "beans" I'm sure we can agree, are embryos and black is used as a description almost exclusively to signify something to do with Severian or the Torturers. Black Sun (a name of the Conciliator) Black Killer are two examples. I posit that the "handful of black beans" are the embryonic clones of Ymar, brought from the stars where Ymar left to try to bring the New Sun and right his father's wrong. I have found five of these black beans. They are: The Mandragora Little Severian Severian Ouen Master Palaemon Note the age progression, the life stages of man. Hardly proof you say. But there's more. Listen to Dr. Talos: "'The castle? The monster? The man of learning? I only just thought of it. Surely you know that just as the momentous events of the past cast their shadows down the ages, so now, when the sun is drawing toward the dark, our own shadows race into the past to trouble mankind's dreams.'" (Sword p. 186) He is saying that the past and present influence and echo each other. The resonance between Severian and the Mandragora needs no explanation. Little Severian is raised by woodcutters and orphaned, and again there is the name. (This brings up the sinister implication, reinforced

by Graves, that Little Severian might not have died accidentally but was a surrogate sacrifice for Big Sev. but that's another topic.) Severian was born of a monial, raised by torturers, and there's the incident with Triskele which is paralleled by the only anecdote given about Ymar: his chasing of the dog. Palaemon is exiled to Thrax as a Journeyman with Terminus Est for some unknown offence, most likely showing mercy to a client. And Ouen.

The two look identical for one thing. The other parallel is tricky and somewhat circular. Severian has a relationship with Dorcas who is Ouen's "mother". Ouen has a relationship with Katherine, Severian's "mother" but, since they are both genetically the same person they are both also Oedipus. Now Severian's relationship with Dorcas makes perfect thematic sense, as does her comments to Severian prior to sex of "Won't I be too small?" She isn't speaking of going in but of coming out, a reflection of her death during childbirth. This also is her instant connection with Severian. She loves him because he is her son (as Ouen) but in her ignorance of her previous living life confuses these feelings with romantic love.

So, who is Severian's sister? The answer is that Severian's sister is Ymar's sister, Fish, who was buried beneath the walls of the city, or more accurately, lives in a place that must be reached by travelling underground. The Atrium of Time. Valeria is Severian's sister and his wife, Pharaonic style. This is why they don't have sex. "I am all sisters we breed, and all the sons." she too is a clone. The brother sun, sister moon theme is also reinforced in Graves. (This however, does not preclude Merryn from also being Severian's sister.) If you analyze Valeria's words to Severian they are quite ambiguous and could easily be words of sisterly love.

I've said this before and I'll reiterate: Ymar is the other Severian that Sev speaks of (Sword pp. 405-6). "He too was reared by torturers, I think. . . and so, even as I, he (who in the final sense is and was myself) became Autarch in turn and sailed beyond the candles of night. . . He was not returned to his own time but became himself a walker of the corridors. . . I know too in whose mausoleum I tarried as a child, that little building of stone with its rose, its fountain, and its flying ship all graven. I have disturbed my own tomb, and now I go to lie in it." Ymar has done all of these things and he ruled (according to the tale of Frog) by the red flower, the rose. The other Severian is not named Severian. Again Graves reinforces this thematically on page 321 of *The White Goddess*, but I really think this essay won't bear much more exposition and have a place on this list. The evidence of Severian's lineage, while circumstantial and riddling, is compelling and, I think, correct.

Addendum: I looked up the name Ymar on the net and it means Ox in Hebrew. This is from King Jesus p.219: "How do you say "ox" in Hebrew?" "We say Aleph."