

Shapeshifting Evidence and Principles

The Urth list — 13 messages, 7 voices, 27 May 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4629>

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b sharp — 27 May 2006, 17:24

If you find it impossible that 5th Head of Cerberus could be part of the history before BotNS, then you should skip this first paragraph. In this book we see (very hazily) that during a wave of human space migration, they encounter an alien shape-shifting species which can imitate humans almost exactly, manual dexterity being the most difficult part. Dr Veil (Aunt Jeannine) teaches that shape-shifting to imitate a human cannot be perfect because that would involve losing the ability to shape-shift. And evolution would not allow for a creature to lose its most advantageous trait.

In BotNS, Melito's story contains an angel with shapeshifting ability. This angel can give away its shapeshifting ability for a while then take it back.

We know that angels are divinely created, not evolved like beasts. Still the angel cannot give up one thing, which its essential essence as a divine creation. Therefore it needs to call in an actual (evolved) eagle to take its place in a birdfight.

We don't actually see Zak and Tzadkiel shape-shift but he presents the clearest evidence for shape-shifting. We learn from Severian that one of the deepest instincts of a shape-shifting, imitating creature must be to run away when the masquerade is discovered. In 5th Head, Number Five is able to chase Dr. Marsch away by insisting he is an abo from Sainte Anne imitating a human.

So who better than Tzadkiel to explain shape-shifting to Severian? She explains that, "the cells of our bodies shift, like those of certain sea creatures on your Urth (sponges I think) which can be pressed through a screen yet reunite. What then prevents me from shaping a miniature and constricting the connection until it parts?" So, Roy (as we both knew), size-shifting really is a function of shape-shifting. But now we have a Poriferal mechanism to explain it.

Severian also tells Tzadkiel that he has been told two stories with shapeshifting in them but he asks about only one of them, Melito's angel story. Tzadkiel assures Severian that he can't give that ability to humans (including larval Hierogrammates). But what about the other story?

I think he means Foila's story which is interesting (and the best IMHO).

The Armiger's Daughter seems to appear in three guises, as a masked horse rider, as a sort of bird-person and as an angel with a sword. She is marked in each guise by the color brown and a gold ring on her ankle. Her arm is hurt while she is a horserider and the wound is maintained when she becomes the bird- person (it isn't mentioned for the angel). She is not observed flying as a bird or angel, so perhaps the shape-shifting is in appearance only and not substance. We are told that the beliefs of her land include that shape-changers will not change once they have been made prisoner.

So.....as I see it, this evidence suggests these BotNS principles: that shape shifters are most likely to be found in the past, the future and on planets other than Urth. Time and space travel make it possible for shapeshifters to travel to Urth. If so, they will go through great lengths to

hide themselves and their abilities. The imitation can never be perfect and they will always be marked by some sign of their original nature. They won't shift in front of our eyes, or while imprisoned. The shape change may be just visual illusion in some cases, but can be of substance in other cases.

Now, perhaps Gene Wolfe has created an Urth in which shape-shifting legends and aliens could visit, but never do. Perhaps the abos of Sainte Anne were wiped out and that's all there is to the story. Maybe the Urth stories within the story are no more than pure fiction. Perhaps dinosaurs are not dragons, just bones. Maybe these myths and legends are just a fun way for Wolfe to place false clues and mislead fanciful readers who might still, in their hearts, long for a Pegasus. We each have our own view on that, I think.

-bsharp

Roy C. Lackey — 28 May 2006, 20:13 · follows b sharp

Bsharp wrote a well crafted little essay that I almost wish I didn't have to take issue with.

If you find it impossible that 5th Head of Cerberus could be part of the history before BotNS, then you should skip this first paragraph. In this book we see (very hazily) that during a wave of human space migration, they encounter an alien shape-shifting species which can imitate humans almost exactly, manual dexterity being the most difficult part. Dr Veil (Aunt Jeannine) teaches that shape-shifting to imitate a human cannot be perfect because that would involve losing the ability to shape-shift. And evolution would not allow for a creature to lose its most advantageous trait.

5HC may have taken place in Urth's past, but if so it was a very distant past and for that reason little or no more related to the Sun Cycle than PEACE or PANDORA, which may also have taken place in Earth's/Urth's past. The level of technology evidenced in 5HC does not seem to be all that much advanced from what we have on Earth today, or, more properly, what has been envisioned for decades by many science fiction writers to be available in the relatively near future. But the more telling indicator that 5HC is not far removed from our present is the pronounced French and English influence evidenced on the twin planets. Historical enmity between the two nations on Earth has obviously been extended to the colonies. The Urth of Severian's day is so many thousands of years in the future of either country that neither of them exists, even as a legend. The "Saint" part of the colony names shows a strong Christian influence, whereas on Urth Christ has been long forgotten.

If the twin planets in 5HC had a place in Urth's history, it would have to have been early in the First Empire, a time that had long passed before Typhon came on the scene and tried to rekindle a second empire.

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Now how the hell am I supposed to argue with that? <g>

Earlier, bsharp asked:

So, when Roy says "I see no evidence of shape-shifting in NEW SUN," is he saying Urth legends are not evidence? Or that shape-shifting is a pegasus,

a piece which does not fit his mental picture?

Yes to the first question, with the exception of Tzadkiel, previously noted, who isn't a legend -- in the story. Yes to the second question, also. I realize that to ask you to point out your "Pegasus" in the text would be unfair, given the nature of what we have to work with, but at least show me the bones and feathers of a flying horse. I don't think you can. Belief isn't proof -- and I'm hardheaded.

I don't see that any plot purpose would be served by a shape-shifting Inire. He remained the power behind the throne for the decade of Severian's autarchy. Severian's first manuscript was written at the end of that decade. How could he have remained ignorant of Inire's alleged abilities for so long, and if he wasn't ignorant of them, why would he have concealed that knowledge from his theoretical readers? After learning of Tzadkiel's abilities, why would he not have connected Inire to such an ability, if he thought Inire had it, and said something about it in his second manuscript, where Inire is hardly even mentioned? The show was all over when he wrote the second manuscript, the deed was done; why hide it?

We learn from Tzadkiel that less than fully-mature Hierogrammates cannot change their shape. We know that Inire was a cacogen. Therefore he would have to be a Hierogrammate on the order of Tzadkiel in order to change shape, or else be a member of another species that has that ability, and who is **also** working for Tzadkiel, in effect a "holy slave". I don't think that Inire is a Hierogrammate. The Hierodules were created by the Hierogrammates to tamper with human destiny, and Tzadkiel said that the ability to shape-shift cannot be designated. Though Inire need not belong to the same species as B and F, who do not seem to have that ability, it seems to me a stretch that Wolfe would create a character with that ability, when no meaningful plot purpose is served.

Why would a being who could make himself look like a man call attention to himself by running around a lazaret looking like a monkey if he had a choice in the matter?

-Roy

b sharp — 28 May 2006, 22:20 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy, thanks for the responsive and thoughtful (in both senses of the word) post.

In regards to 5th Head, I do have a sense of the time frame and when I say I think they belong in the same universe I don't mean the immediate story blends right into BotNS. But Sainte Anne and Sainte Croix don't just disappear when the 5th Head story ends. They have a future and I see the established principles there appear in BotNS. If you don't see cloning or shapeshifting or characters similar to #5 and Phaedria then okay, I do accept that. It may be a complete illusion or just a function of Gene Wolfe's subconscious interests in that period of his life that I see but, what can I say. I see it.

Perhaps my Atrium of Time post will be more to your liking. It is very nuts and bolts.

Human beings have different sort of brains and it can be nearly impossible for unlike brains to see eye to eye. So instead I'll use this post to illustrate not my "rightness" but to illustrate my current position. So..take a look at this picture:

http://www.valerio.net/pictures/image_2_996.jpg

What are your first thoughts? Mine are, "okay, a ring" and "where is the jewel?". Now to me, Roy

and mournings glory stop with, "okay a ring".

If I say "where is the jewel?" they say a ring doesn't need a jewel. I say but "there is a jewel missing!" They say "we have no reason to think that. A ring is a round piece of metal that goes around your finger and looks pretty. This object is a ring, it has all the attributes of a ring, end of story, no jewel needed." "But there is an empty space...never mind, let me look around".

So, I go looking for the missing jewel. I find a few that don't fit. I find one on the floor, under the table. I try putting it in the empty space between the tines and it seems to fit. Roy and mg say, the jewel is worthless or interesting, but adds nothing to the purpose of the ring. "It doesn't make it rounder, or more metallic or fit your finger better or prettier". I say, "well I think it might make it prettier, depending on taste and it makes the ring richer and more valuable but...welll....anyway, look, there are tines which hold jewels and the tines are empty and here is a jewel in the right place, at the right time, with the right shape....". Then I give up and write this post.

In the meantime I have my original inspriation for joining here, Robert Borski, yelling over my shoulder from his book that the four doubled tines represent the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, which makes it obvious the missing jewel is the Star of Nepal. The filigree on the side of the ring looks North African and thus represents the theft of the Star of Nepal by the Bey of Tunis. Using cryptonymic analysis we reverse Bey to achieve the word YEB, and we know that in Semitic languages a J has a Y sound so the ring means the next president of the USA will be you know who.

A day in the life of Bsharp. How I suffer in the middle LOL! In seriousness I appreciate all the input, guidance and collaboration I've found in this community so far. It has been just great.

-bsharp

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 28 May 2006, 23:58 · follows b sharp

On Mon, 29 May 2006 08:20:48 +1000 b sharp

<bsharporflat at hotmail.com> wrote:

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I don't think that's the real dichotomy. Better: "Here's a nice shiny jewel - let's shove it in the ring!" vs "But it doesn't fit, and if you scratch it, it flakes. Let's find a real gem that fits."

Chris — 29 May 2006, 00:20 · in reply to b sharp

What you are primarily missing here, I think, is a reference to the Templars.

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-bsharp

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 29 May 2006, 01:05 · follows Chris

I wrote:

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Well, that certainly sounds more aggressive than I intended. I really meant that everybody finds themselves on different sides of that division from time to time. What looks like ill-fitting tawdry costume paste to some may look like the Wossisname diamond to others, or even to the same person at a different time. Etc etc etc.

I don't think anybody really denies the existence of empty jewel settings which we're supposed to fill in for ourselves.

b sharp — 29 May 2006, 04:59 · follows thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

mournings glory writes:

I've recently been accused off-list of being a bully in here, and hope this doesn't further damage my credibility or rep; nevertheless, if you're only interested in applause or >self-gratification, maybe you shouldn't masturbate in public. Now please, sir, let's see what you >come up with next!

Well, I'm not happy to see that my 20 year quest for solutions to the mysteries in BotNS has been reduced to applause seeking, self-gratification and masturbating in public. I guess that could be called bullying language, I don't know. You called me sir, was that an attempt to be courteous?

mg also writes:

Actually, I've never endorsed the mirror theory. In my opinion the slug is able to enter the House >Absolute the same way the white wolves are, via any number of hidden or forgotten entrances.

So Hethor doesn't use shapeshifting or mirrors. Interesting theory. So the slug has nothing to do with Hethor, it is just a wild creature that drops in when it wants to? This really ignores large chunks of text.

mg says:

I pointed out the likely shapeshifting ability of Venant unless he naturally looks like the very human, if false, Epitome of Urth.

I tried to nicely correct these two textual mistakes you made and I think Roy did too, on one of them. But you repeat them. Either you ignored our posts or didn't read them. You don't seem too interested in reading the BotNS text either. If you are going to be blundering, insulting,

self-righteous and make up your own text then I'm not sure what benefit I can get from discourse with you.

Chris writes:

What you are primarily missing here, I think, is a reference to the Templars.

That's not much to go on Chris. Any further info you can provide?

Thalassocrat says:

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I appreciate the politeness of your re-statement but I think your original words more accurately reflect your feelings. Though I am new to this message board I am not new to BotNS. Being less familiar with later works I do not mention them much. I sometimes submit off-the-cuff posts and I try to identify them as such. My serious posts are have been carefully thought out and researched for positive and negative evidence in the text. To avoid clutter I eschew citing chapter and page but if needed I could start.

As noted in my ring analogy, I do not start exploring a puzzle by looking on the floor for pretty pieces then try to make them fit somewhere. I start by looking at the picture as a whole and notice gaps. Then I look for pieces which fit.

I do welcome criticism. If you feel a gap doesn't exist, I am interested in why. If you feel there is a gap but my proposed piece doesn't fit I am interested in that also. I strongly prefer criticism which finds contradiction directly from the text. If a person just needs to vent their emotions regarding one of my posts, to say it doesn't "feel right to me", that's okay too, though not as useful.

I am not very open to criticism which use vague, unsupported arguments such as "that doesn't help the plot" or "there is no need for that". These sorts of statements imply the speaker fully and entirely apprehends the intentions and devices of the author. That the mind of Gene Wolfe, the subtext, plot and themes of BotNS are in such full understanding that the power of authoritative judgement has been conferred. If there is someone here who does have a full grasp of the BotNS please let him be identified. From all I've seen in my various searches of the past 20 years, there is no one on earth, save perhaps one, who comes close to that power of judgement.

I will again state my quest: I hope to understand as much as possible about the work of art called The Book of The New Sun and its companion Urth of the New Sun and the intentions of the brilliant mind that created it. I welcome friendly, intelligent discourse and would rather avoid unpleasantness, ignorance and competition but my goal is as stated. By documenting my progress I hope to enlist the help of people with the same goal and perhaps to help them as well.

-bsharp

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 29 May 2006, 05:13 · in reply to b sharp

On 5/28/06, b sharp <bsharporflat at hotmail.com> wrote:

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Be,

How do you feel about extratextual statements by the writer?

I ask because some people feel that the author of a work has no special authority over the work or its interpretation once it has been published (which makes me wonder how they deal with revised versions and suchlike but anyway). I tend to take a more moderate stance myself.

At any rate Wolfe has made some surprisingly unequivocal statements that 5HC does -not- take place in the past of the Solar books. I think that it's beyond clear that they are conceptually linked, but with such statements on the record, only extremely cogent, exigent, and -clear- evidence would convince me to accept an interpretive framework which involved assuming that 5HC did, in fact, take place in the past of the New Sun.

(Perhaps more problematic: Wolfe seems to have it clearly fixed in his mind that the Solar books take place in a previous "cycle" of the universe, and not in our "future" at all. If that's the case, then it might be argued that the Solar books are in 5HC's _past_, assuming of course that 5HC is in our possible future.

So..take a look at this picture:

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What are your first thoughts?

"What is it made of? Is it an ancient piece where the jewel has been lost, or a modern piece from one of those stores where you select the jewel and the ring and they assemble it for you?"

I also find myself wondering whether those are gem chips of some sort in the filigree work.

It would not occur to me to say "Okay, a ring," because that flashes past too fast for me to notice. That it's (a picture of) a ring registers before I can have any _conscious_ thoughts about it at all.

If I were to follow in your analogy, I guess I'd have to say that I agree with you that the lack-of-a-jewel is the most interesting feature of the ring; but I'm more interested in the space where the jewel might go than I am in the (hypothetical) jewel itself.

To me, it is a space where any number of different jewels might be affixed by any number of different jewelers -- if you want to get all technical about it, it represents (to me) a paradigm with a space held open for a selection from a syntagm of different objects (jewels), but I really don't want to go into all that theoretical language right now.

What can we tell about the jewel? In some ways, very little -- the picture being decolored, we can't tell what color the metal or any chips in the filigree might be, so we can't tell what color of jewel might fit well into it.

We can tell a bit more about the shape -- it looks to me like it's fitted for a square-cut jewel; a pearl wouldn't work very well, then. But then, looking a little more closely, the corners of the square are edged-in a bit, so not quite square, more of a semiregular octagon. This together with the filigree work suggests a fairly fancy cut.

And, though we don't know what size this ring is, we can make a general estimate of the size of the gap from the normal range of human fingers: the jewel would be, at the absolute outside, a centimetre across. If someone were to tell me that this were actually a ring made for an Angrborn, of course, I would have to revise that estimate upwards.

So that gives me a range of possible jewels ... or, to return from the ring to its analogic sense, a range of possible interpretations of a mysterious feature in a text. Ideally, I like to keep that range open, rather than choosing a single "right" interpretation. What I'll do is build mental models of the text that allow for rich and interesting interpretationS, and while I'll often argue for the interpretation that fascinates me most, it doesn't mean that I think that others are necessarily "wrong."

Gaps -- elisions -- are fascinating things...

--Dan'I

I do not fear Satan half so much as I fear those who fear him.

-- St Teresa of Avila

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

Tristan Davenport — 29 May 2006, 08:22 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Dan'I wrote:

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Now I'm curious about this business of cycles. How closely does Wolfe's universe repeat itself cycle after cycle? I'm asking because this puts me in mind of one of Silk's enlightenments in BotLS. He's given a vision of Jesus very close to what's described in the Bible -- riding in on the ass, people waving green branches, etc. This suggests to me that the Sun series takes place in **our** future. An equally compelling bit of evidence occurs when Silk is talking to someone (Horn?) about life in other cities in the whorl. He mentions that foreigners often speak other languages, including (and he names it specifically) French. In BotNS, an ancient language is represented by Latin, but it's never called "Latin" in the text. Is this mentioning of French a goof-up on Wolfe's part, or a clear reference to our own epoch? Excuse the lack of page/volume references.

One more question: Does the wedding ring given by Silk to Hyacinth (in Exodus, I think) depict the face of an avorn?

Tristan

tristan_davenport at hotmail.com

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 29 May 2006, 13:36 · follows Tristan Davenport

On Mon, 29 May 2006 18:22:43 +1000 Tristan Davenport
<tristan_davenport at hotmail.com> wrote:
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Hmmm, what's the basis for that?

Let me throw in another one: are the juvenile form of the Hierogrammates in any way related to the huge moth SilkHorn sees on one of his astral journeys to Green? The one with wings marked with a cross and a circle? I doubt it, but I think you could spin a fun theory from it.

Thinking of Alpheta and her kin wafts me towards cosmological thoughts which touch on your point. I really don't believe Wolfe expects us to be very happy about the BOTNS universe. Angelic beings whose idea of justice is slow genocide in retribution for the sins of distant ancestors? Redemption via accelerated genocide? Mutant bureaucratic moth-creatures supevising the affairs of the worlds?

Nah. It's all wrong. The BOTNS powers & dominions are separated from the Increate, like Gabriel in Melito's story: "The Pancreator is infinitely far from me." In LS/SS, the Outsider comes inside, and, IMO, things are fundamentally, cosmologically diffrent.

I don't know whether it's just a change in Wolfe's storytelling context, or whether there's actually supposed to be some kind of progression leading from one to the other.

But if it's the first, linking the two series looks unnecessary and awkward (if not downright inept). I prefer to believe the second, that the Outsider coming inside has changed things fundamentally, all through history, and through the cycles of history. Jesus in the deep past; Silk's enlightenment, and all the flows from it, in the present.

Which is a long & tendentious way of saying, yup, I agree: the SS/LS universe is ours, and the

BOTS universe isn't.

Roy C. Lackey — 29 May 2006, 19:08 · follows thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

Andrew wrote:

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The many references made to the Increate in the Urth Cycle leave little room to doubt that Increate means God, as, for example, Dan'I uses the word God. Severian, at least, believed that he was doing God's will when he destroyed Urth. "It came to me that when the Increate had chosen me his instrument to destroy the land, only babes and beasts had died in innocence." (URTH, 333)

-Roy

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 29 May 2006, 20:01 · follows Roy C. Lackey

On Tue, 30 May 2006 05:08:52 +1000 "Roy C. Lackey"

<rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

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Sure, the Increate is God, and Sev & others believe they are doing God's will. But nobody seems to have a direct line to him; they're guessing.

I do think Sev's prayer in the chapel of the Pelerines is very instructive (Ch 14 of Citadel).

"I remained conscious of my kneeling body, but only as a peripheral burden. My mind was among the starry wastes, far from Urth and indeed far from Urth's archipeligo of island worlds, and it seemed to me that that to which I spoke was farther still - I had come, as it were, to the walls of the universe, and now shouted through the walls to one who waited outside."

At this point, I think you'd normally expect any answer to the prayer to come from the Increate, who is surely the same as the later "Outsider". But no; Sev finds only himself.

"... I seemed to see ... through the chink in the universe to a new universe ... where my listener knelt to hear me. What had seemed a crevice in the world had expanded until I could see a face and folded hands, and the opening, like a tunnel, running deep into a human head ... I was

whispering into my own ear ..."

Of course, it's as the New Sun that Sev finds himself. But even as the New Sun, the Conciliator, the holiest thing around, I don't recall the smallest hint that Sev experiences any form of communion with the Increate.

In the New Sun universe, the Outsider isn't taking any calls.

don doggett — 31 May 2006, 05:03 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

--- Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

So that gives me a range of possible jewels ... or,
to return from
the ring to its analogic sense, a range of possible
interpretations
of a mysterious feature in a text. Ideally, I like
to keep that range
open, rather than choosing a single "right"
interpretation. What I'll
do is build mental models of the text that allow for
rich and
interesting interpretationS, and while I'll often
argue for the
interpretation that fascinates me most, it doesn't
mean that I think
that others are necessarily "wrong."

Gaps -- elisions -- are fascinating things...

Amen to that. They're the reason most great religious texts survive and carry relevance, as well as great literature imo.

This list would have degenerated into nitpicks years ago if not for the deliberate (and absolutely pitch perfect) vagueness of Wolfe's narrative.

Don