

Close Reading: Torturer Chapter II: Severian

The Urth list — 5 messages, 5 voices, 10 Sep 2006

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JWillard — 10 Sep 2006, 06:13

Paragraph #3: "That first recollection is of piling pebbles in the Old Yard." Casual comment, or something more? My mind traveled to Sev being overwhelmed by the Sand Garden (XIX), and his comment, ""I felt I belonged there," I said. "That I was to meet someone ... and that a certain woman was there, nearby, but concealed from sight."" Don't know; probably nothing.

#4: "... they seldom had much stomach for expelling us from our lurking places in the cypress groves." Robert Graves talks about the cypress in The White Goddess: "Thus as the tree of Sunday, succeeding the alder of Saturday, it symbolized resurrection in the Orphic mysteries, the escape of the Sun-hero from Calypso's alder-girt island, and became attached to the cult of the Celestial Hercules. Cypress is still the prime resurrection symbol in Mediterranean church-yards." Are all the torturers being groomed as potential new suns? And how much of the Hercules cult is explored in BotNS: Palaemon is a link to Hercules and the White Goddess.

#5: Does the layout of where the different social strata are buried help us anywhere else?

#6: "...observing how cruel the women were and how often they exceeded the punishments he had decreed..." Is Wolfe in agreement with Severian and Ymar, or is this misogynous comment specific to his characters?

#8: What "great northern clan" does Eata believe he belongs to?

#9: Crucial paragraph, but I have no new observations.

#10: I'm stupid: Is the giant fox a lion? I puzzled over this paragraph. It seems so simple, but it nags at me. Then the line in #11 nags me more: "The decades of a saros would not be long enough for me to write all they meant to the ragged apprentice boy I was." Is this a pointer disguised as reminiscence? Is there importance in the procession/order of animals mentioned? (Lion (?), snake, hawk.) Is there some astrological significance here?

#11: "The second ..." Does the white fountain do more than resurrect? Any odd critters out there other than Hethor's?

#14: Once again, torturers have a disturbing idea of fun, don't they?

#20 and 27: Two comments specific to Eata: "Eata guessed, I think - before they come too near to being men, boys often have an almost female insight," and after Sev's drowning, "I ... thought that some defect in my own vision was multiplying Eata's eyes." Are we meant to think something about Eata?

#25: Why a spoon? Why?

#26: Is he in Thecla's cell? Mother's cell?

#12, 21, 27: What is it with hair in this chapter?

Dialogue after #28: "Someone in the crowd said, "He shot right out of the water!"" It's almost as if Severian *himself* is Excalibur in this image. Someone who's read this recently: Why does the boatman (Charon?) have "tar-stained clothes"? I'm sure it's something obvious. ""No, no," Roche told him, "There are no women in our guild."" This fact is given special emphasis in this chapter, bookended by the earlier reference to Ymar and Roche's response here.

Last paragraph: "Night atop the khan" Last chapter we had one mention of Erebus; here one of Night.

Bruce Hayles — 10 Sep 2006, 16:46 · in reply to JWillard

Severian adopts the fountain, ship volant, and rose as his devices. A couple of pages ago we were told that "We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges." The fountain is the New Sun, the ship the Tzadkiel's ship, and the rose new life on Urth (I think someone has suggested that is love also, or instead). Severian obsesses about two things "The first was that at some not-distant time, time itself would stop ... The second was that there existed somewhere in a miraculous light... that engendered life in whatever objects it fell upon..." Why is Severian thinking these things? Obviously this foreshadows what will happen later, but are we also being told something about the power of symbols again--that Severian was shaped by the tomb that bore his face? If so, we were clearly misdirected earlier. The focus is put on Severian's tying himself to Vodalus when Severian talks about the coin Vodalus gave him. We are told that symbols shape things, but can Vodalus really be compared in magnitude to the ship volant, the fountain, and the rose? Yet Severian directs our attention to Vodalus, not the ship volant, fountain, and rose. Does Severian see the connection between the symbols graven on his tomb and what he would later do? It certainly seems Wolfe is at least trying to tell us they are important, because he gives us the symbol speech. If all Wolfe wanted us to do was think Vodalus in responsible part for the person Severian became, is the symbol speech actually necessary? We all know enough Pop Psychology that we could draw that rather shallow indirect connection. It seems instead that Wolfe is giving us a rule, and that we can use that rule to derive the influence of the ship volant, the fountain, and the rose, despite the fact that Severian does not emphasize them whatsoever. If this is so, Wolfe is an amazing teacher: he shows Severian instructing us on the power of symbols yet simultaneously being blind to them (making their power all the more evident).

On 9/9/06, JWillard <aldenweer at charter.net> wrote:

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Roy C. Lackey — 11 Sep 2006, 06:43 · follows Bruce Hayles

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[snip]

The rose, most directly, symbolizes the Claw. The Claw symbolizes the "Eternal Principle", all that is sacred and holy. (CITADEL, chapter XXXI)

Does Severian see the connection between the symbols graven on his tomb and what he would later do?

[snip]

I don't think so. It wasn't until he was pricked by the thorn of the wild rose on the beach late in CITADEL that he made the connection between the Claw he had surrendered at the Pelerine camp and the blood-tainted thorn he pulled from his arm. He carried that thorn for ten years before Apheta finally made him understand that it was/would become *the* Claw stolen by Agia.

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I don't see a connection between the pebbles and the Sand Garden, but the Sand Garden to some extent replicated/foreshadowed what would happen months later on the beach, right down to the tracks of the two-wheeled cart, which had no business being on that beach. The person he was to meet was likely his future self, and the concealed woman almost certainly the part of Thecla that would soon be forever part of him, and *was* in him that day on the beach.

-Roy

b sharp — 11 Sep 2006, 19:05 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Addressing some notes from JWillard's post (and apologies for repeating things from my previous posts)

Paragraph #3: "That first recollection is of piling pebbles in the Old Yard." Casual comment, or >something more?

I think it is very important, paired with Severian's later, augmented recollection of piling pebbles, "as Thecla dodged the hooves of my father's mounted guard". Others attribute this less importance.

#5: Does the layout of where the different social strata are buried help us anywhere else?

Does the location of Vodalus' victim mark her as an armiger? She is on higher ground, not near the river, right? I notice the term "potter's field" is used for the burial area of the scruffiest. The internet says: "A potter's field is a place for the burial of unknown or indigent people." and "The term comes from Matthew 27:7 in the New Testament of the Bible, in which priests take 30 pieces of silver returned by a repentant Judas and "used the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners."

#6: "...observing how cruel the women were and how often they exceeded the punishments he >had decreed..." Is Wolfe in agreement with Severian and Ymar, or is this misogynous comment >specific to his characters?

In our politically correct world, this comment might seem misogynistic but I don't see it that way. First, the comment has an ironic tone because women are stereotyped as the nurturing gender. A similar comment noting men are more cruel than women wouldn't garner much attention. It might be Wolfe acknowledging the stereotype of the ball-busting woman who has been given unchecked power. Then again we have Severian killing Madame Prisca for the crime of a bit of cruel taunting...Looking across all Wolfe's work I think it could be said that males and females generally tend to stay within traditional gender roles (yes, there are exceptions, but generally..).

#8: What "great northern clan" does Eata believe he belongs to?

I think it is pure fantasy. Eata's blonde hair and light complexion mark him as being from the South.

#9: Crucial paragraph, but I have no new observations.

I have one, I think. There are 5 coffins. "...two empty ones lay on the floor. Three more too heavy for me to shift and still intact, waited on the shelves along one wall." Some have wondered when Severian's corpse might return to inhabit one of the empty coffins but it is the closed coffins (presumably full?) which are "waiting" not the open ones. This ties to my previous posts suggesting the five coffins refer to the five heads of Cerberus, literary avatars of Wolfe, and a cameo appearance in the funeral bronze. If the two open coffins gave us #5 and Severian then who will be released from the other three? Latro?, Silk?, Horn? Anyone have thoughts on who Wolfe's primary avatars would be?

#26: Is he in Thecla's cell? Mother's cell?

He hears a woman crying. I think it is his mother's cell, the near-death experience forcing his memory back further than stacking pebbles. Later (in Urth?) he remembers nursing in a cell and a dark haired woman, I think.

#28: Why does the boatman (Charon?) have "tar-stained clothes"? I'm sure it's something >obvious.

Sailors on old wooden ships and boats would waterproof them with pitch or tar, making "tar" a nickname for sailors. This boatman, Dorcas' husband and Maxellindis' uncle are all sailors and all discuss undines so I think they might all be the same person, Severian failing to notice. (I don't have Citadel here but wasn't Dorcas' final boat "freshly pitched"?)

-bsharp

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 11 Sep 2006, 20:34 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

A very few additional comments.

A rose is traditionally (among other things) a symbol of the Trinity; Dante's vision of God at the end of the Commedia is an eternally-unfolding Rose.

Para7: "In our Matachin Tower, a certain bar of iron thrusts from a bulkhead at the height of a man's groin." Am I the only person who has had some rather grisly thoughts about what this bar was for?

Also Para7, on time scale: "...the days of Ymar...are now by many hundreds of years forgotten."

Para13: What is "high-toss-cockle"? I don't actually suppose it's important, just curious...

General on Gyll: They're swimming in the sewage of everyone upriver.

Para16: Someone asked about Potter's Field. It's a pretty common term for the place where paupers are buried; it's used ironically in the film *It's A Wonderful Life* -- the evil banker is named "Potter," and in the allohistorical world where George Bailey never lived, Bedford Falls becomes a city of the dead, a Potter's Field.

Para20: "I have chosen to describe all this now because I never went again after the day on which I saved Vodalus." Not to mention that this is the earliest part of his life he's narrating at all, so it makes sense to give some detail... Severian is often defensive about his narrative choices.

Para25ff: Apparition of Malrubius: Sev's first encounter with the giantess is accompanied by his first encounter with an aquastor, suggesting strongly that his near-drowning is part of the ****plan**** by which the Hiero*s are manipulating him to his fate.

Para26: Note that the giantess throws him up by flinging him down.

Para27: "I was enveloped in eyes as one is enveloped in the repetitious patterns of a kaleidoscope..." this is pretty close to one of the descriptions of an angel (I think a cherub?) in the Old Testament. I don't think it's Eata's eyes, or those of the crowd, he's seeing here.

Para33ff: the old boatman seekign a woman. I don't think he's asking about the Brides; I think he's looking for Dorcas.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

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I've got a piece of braaaaaain lodge in me heeead!!!