

The Guild's Revolutionary

The Urth list — 36 messages, 16 voices, 21 Nov 2009

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5521>

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Gwern Branwen — 21 Nov 2009, 17:24

"How horrible. What is that behind it? That tangle of wire' and the great glass globe over the table?"

"Ah," said Master Gurloes. "We call this the revolutionary. The subject lies here. Will you, Chatelaine?"

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"Severian, push up your handle there until this needle's here." A coil that had been as cold as a snake when I had touched it a moment before was warm now.

"What does it do?"

"I couldn't describe it, Chatelaine. Anyway, I've never had it done, you see."

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Her right hand was creeping upward, toward her eyes. I caught it and forced it back.

"I thought I saw my worst enemy, a kind of demon. And it was me."

Her scalp was bleeding. I put clean lint there and taped it down, though I knew it would soon be gone. Curling, dark hairs were entangled in her fingers.

"Since then, I can't control my hands . . . I can if I think about it, if I know what they're doing. But it is so hard, and I'm getting tired." She rolled her head away and spat blood. "I bite myself. Bite the lining of my cheeks, and my tongue and lips. Once my hands tried to strangle me, and I thought oh good, I will die now. But I only lost consciousness, and they must have lost their strength, because I woke. It's like that machine, isn't it?"

I said, "Allowin's necklace."

"But worse. My hands are trying to blind me now, to tear my eyelids away. Will I be blind?"

"Yes," I said.

"How long before I die?"

"A month, perhaps. The thing in you that hates you will weaken as you weaken.

The revolutionary brought it to life, but its energy is your energy, and in the end you will die together."

"Severian . . ."

I was reading Thomas Metzinger's The Ego Tunnel, and he mentioned that there was a disorder called 'alien hand syndrome' where one hand attacks the rest of the body or pursues separate goals. From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alien_hand_syndrome :

They feel that they have no control over the movements of the 'alien' hand, but that, instead, the hand has the capability of acting autonomously — i.e., independent of their voluntary control. The hand effectively has 'a will of its own.' Alien hands can perform complex acts such as undoing buttons, removing clothing, and manipulating tools. Alien behavior can be distinguished from reflexive behavior in that the former is flexibly purposive while the latter is obligatory. Sometimes the sufferer will not be aware of what the alien hand is doing until it is brought to his or her attention, or until the hand does something that draws their attention to its behavior.

Sufferers of alien hand will often personify the rogue limb, for example believing it to be "possessed" by some intelligent or alien spirit or an entity that they may name or identify. There is a clear distinction between the behaviors of the two hands in which the affected hand is viewed as "wayward" and sometimes "disobedient" and generally out of the realm of their own voluntary control, while the unaffected hand is under normal volitional control. At times, particularly in patients

who have sustained damage to the corpus callosum that connects the two cerebral hemispheres (see also split-brain), the hands appear to be acting in opposition to each other. For example, one patient was observed putting a cigarette into her mouth with her intact, 'controlled' hand (her right, dominant hand), following which her alien, non-dominant, left hand came up to grasp the cigarette, pull the cigarette out of her mouth, and toss it away before it could be lit by the controlled, dominant, right hand.

The character Dr. Strangelove in the movie Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb suffers from the syndrome. His hand seems to act in a more complex manner, so that it acts in accordance with his subconscious urges (e.g. attempting to strangle himself, giving a Nazi salute,).

It appears to have been first described in the '40s and '50s, and named in the '70s. (_Shadow of the Torturer_ was published, of course, in 1980.)

So the Revolutionary induces, specifically alien hand syndrome. Another case of Wolfe cloaking science behind fantasy ('like a demon')?

On a sidenote, I don't know if anyone has discussed this before, but isn't it odd Thecla is put to the Revolutionary? Gurloes specifically says that the torturers don't decide the tortures, and the secret of the Guild is that it alway obeys; so the sentence was someone else's. But the Revolutionary is 'the most hallowed of all' the torture-devices, and Gurloes also "I couldn't describe it [what it does], Chatelaine. Anyway, I've never had it done, you see.", both of which imply use is very rare.

gvern

John Smith — 21 Nov 2009, 18:40 · in reply to Gvern Branwen

Isn't Thecla put to the Revolutionary because she is a revolutionary? ? Or at least associated with her sister, who has joined the revolutionary Vodalus. — Those who revolt against the sacred authority have their hands revolt against them.

The description of this torture gives me nightmares. ?Thanks, Gene.

Best wishes,

Jack

--- On Sat, 11/21/09, Gvern Branwen <gvern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

From: Gvern Branwen <gvern0 at gmail.com>

Subject: (urth) The Guild's Revolutionary

To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>

Date: Saturday, November 21, 2009, 12:24 PM

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Jerry Friedman — 21 Nov 2009, 19:32 · in reply to Gvern Branwen

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Jeff Wilson — 21 Nov 2009, 20:45 · in reply to Gvern Branwen

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I think it's a bit more specific version of the split-brain syndrome, which he also uses in "The Death of Doctor Island".

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Gvern Branwen — 21 Nov 2009, 22:03 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

On Sat, Nov 21, 2009 at 1:40 PM, John Smith <jsmith2627 at att.net> wrote:

Isn't Thecla put to the Revolutionary because she is a revolutionary? Or at least associated with her sister, who has joined the revolutionary Vodalus. Those who revolt against the sacred authority have their hands revolt against them.

Well, Vodalus isn't really a rebel, and she's only associated with her sister, but anyway; that seems like a possible reason, but that's terrible - the method of execution chosen for a pun? But now that I think about it, maybe that works. Just before they reach the Revolutionary, we read Gurloes say:

Behind it there .

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Perhaps this is interpreted otherwise by y'all, but to me this is a very obviously a reference to Franz Kafak's "In The Penal Colony" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_the_Penal_Colony If one cannot use the writing machine to engrave 'do not rebel!' or whatever, perhaps a joke like that is the best that can be done.

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<jerry_friedman at yahoo.com> wrote:

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Not to mention, if they were routinely using it, wouldn't it be broken? The guns are headed that way, and guns seem more reliable than whatever the Revolutionary is - the relatively simple mechanical engraver is already broken beyond their ability to repair.

(I also searched through the 4 books; the Revolutionary is only mentioned 3 or 4 times after that, and always in a Thecla context.)

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David Stockhoff — 21 Nov 2009, 22:54 · follows Gwern Branwen

Fascinating!

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My take on the exchange between Thecla and Gurloes involves Gurloes deliberately and delicately misunderstanding Thecla's question. He knew what she was asking and politely declined to answer. As a deflecting device, he more or less pretended that he thought she meant "What's it like"?, because he couldn't respond to her question as a technical one anyway.

The thing works entirely inside the brain with nothing to observe but the effects afterward. Thus, Gurloes knew no more of its mechanism than we do. The only way he could have more knowledge of it is by experiencing it himself. So he treats her a little bit like a doctor telling a child that "it won't hurt"---a white lie if you will. Also, hinting that when he's done with her she'll understand better than he could have explained, so there is no point.

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On the other hand, perhaps it is rare that the Guild gets such people at all, and therefore it uses the device only rarely.

Message: 1

Date: Sat, 21 Nov 2009 17:03:16 -0500

From: Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com>

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>
Subject: Re: (urth) The Guild's Revolutionary
Message-ID:
<cbf55b100911211403o13a87859rd2bb50be877711d2 at mail.gmail.com>
Content-Type: text/plain; charset=UTF-8

On Sat, Nov 21, 2009 at 1:40 PM, John Smith <jsmith2627 at att.net> wrote:

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aaron — 22 Nov 2009, 01:51 · in reply to David Stockhoff

As I am sure most of you know, Wolfe seems to be fond of bad puns, so I definitely wouldn't put it past him to use one here. His sense of humor, according to him, is pretty strange.

On Sat, Nov 21, 2009 at 5:54 PM, David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:
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Adam Thornton — 22 Nov 2009, 02:26 · in reply to David Stockhoff

On Nov 21, 2009, at 4:54 PM, David Stockhoff wrote:
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Later I found out this might be controversial.

I strongly suspect if we actually put everything together that each reader had always said "Well, DUH, I didn't mention it because I thought everyone knew it already," then we'd actually discover a lot of stuff.

Sort-of-speaking-of-which as someone-who-likes-Baum-way-too-much (although I think Wolfe is Just Plain Wrong about Ruth Plumly Thompson), man, "The Eyeflash Miracles" is brilliant.

Adam

Gwern Branwen — 22 Nov 2009, 02:49 · in reply to Adam Thornton

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It would be nice, but it's hard to do. I mean, if I were reading through _Shadow_ again and I saw the Kafka ref, I wouldn't say 'hm, I wonder if that's on THE LIST already; I'd better get up, go to my computer, fire up my browser, and check'. I'd just go 'Kafka' and continue on. The best way would be to have a webpage of the text of _Shadow_, in a wiki perhaps, and then one could read the text instead of one's book and on reaching that line go, 'why, I see no footnote link, despite it quite obviously being a ref; I think I shall add it.'

Of course, the hard-to-do part is that annotated _Shadow_ pages are copyvios, and while Wolfe has been very obliging of Andre-Driussi, he is also listed as co-author and still I don't see very much quoting in my _Lexicon Urthus_ (at least, nowhere near as much as I would've used), which suggests to me that Wolfe takes his copyright seriously.

gwern

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--- On Sat, 11/21/09, Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote: ...

On Sat, Nov 21, 2009 at 1:40 PM, John Smith <jsmith2627 at att.net> wrote:

Isn't Thecla put to the Revolutionary because she is a revolutionary????Or at least associated with her sister, who has joined the revolutionary Vodalus. ??Those who revolt against the sacred authority have their hands revolt against them.

Well, Vodalus isn't really a rebel,

He's not? I must have missed something.

and she's only associated with her sister,

I'm not so sure. Thecla says at the end of Ch. XII, "It [the revolutionary, or the part of her that hates herself] is a thing from Erebus, from Abaia, a fit companion for me. Vodalus..." I think she mentions those names because they're who she supported or at least sympathized with. The self-hatred caused by the revolutionary may be making her exaggerate, but it seems significant that she mentions Erebus and Abaia rather than accusing herself of cowardly loyalty to the corrupt Commonwealth or selfishly enjoying her position while others starved, or some such.

but anyway; that seems like a possible reason, but that's terrible - the method of execution chosen for a pun? But now that I think about it, maybe that works. Just before they reach the Revolutionary, we read Gurloes say:

? ? ? ? ?

???Behind it there .

. . if you'll take a step this way you'll be able to see it better . . . is what we call the apparatus. It is supposed to letter whatever slogan is demanded in the client's flesh, but it is seldom in working order.

Perhaps this is interpreted otherwise by y'all, but to me this is a very obviously a reference to Franz Kafak's "In The Penal Colony"
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_the_Penal_Colony
If one cannot use the writing machine to engrave 'do not rebel!' or whatever, perhaps a joke like that is the best that can be done.

I agree completely about "In the Penal Colony". That's even something I noticed myself, unlike alien-hand syndrome or Ultan as a tribute to Borges.

However, I think the revolutionary got its name because that's what it does--it's not a pun at all. It creates something that overthrows the mind's governance of itself. And to the people of the Commonwealth, this is an entirely fitting punishment for treason (which is probably what Thecla is condemned for, whether she's guilty or not). Letting the punishment fit the crime is important to them-- not only does Thecla say that, but Palaemon tells Severian it would be "fitting" for him to die by the revolutionary (XIII).

I think this answers David Stockhoff's question about why they bother to use the revolutionary given that people don't know about it, so it doesn't have deterrent value. Many people in our culture, including me, are consequentialists, but people in the Commonwealth may not be so much. The fitness of the punishment is a good enough reason without any useful consequences.

On Sat, Nov 21, 2009 at 2:32 PM, Jerry Friedman
<jerry_friedman at yahoo.com>
wrote:

--- On Sat, 11/21/09, Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com>
wrote:

...

Another case of Wolfe cloaking science behind
fantasy ('like a demon')?

"Like a demon" is how Thecla sees something hateful and hostile. She doesn't have a scientific outlook, but I think a lot of people who do would use a similar description. So I don't see this as a cloak.

I'd say the wires and needle give this definite
scientific trappings.

It definitely does, but it's still coy - 'lightning' rather
than 'electricity'.

Though they do have a word for electricity, which Gurloes forgets or pretends to forget.

I remember in my first reading ever, this
was the scene
that made me sure that the author really was working under
a warped Clarke's 3rd Law.

I can see that.

But the Revolutionary is 'the most hallowed of
all' the
torture-devices, and Gurloes also "I couldn't
describe it
[what it
does], Chatelaine. Anyway, I've never had it done,

you
see.", both of which imply use is very rare.

I don't get that any of that implies that its use is rare. Gurloes means he's never had it done to him, that is, he's never been a victim of it (which is obvious, hence "you see").

But Thecla is not stupid; she knows Gurloes can't give her any description from having had the Revolutionary used on himself. So she couldn't be asking for that,

I partially agree with David Stockhoff here. Gurloes is pretending to misunderstand because he has some reason not to tell Thecla how her punishment works. (Earlier she asks whether he plans to explain whatever will be used on her, and he says, "No, no, I wouldn't do that.")

I'm not sure what his reason is, though. Maybe it's some kind of politeness or consideration, as David suggests, or maybe he's not allowed to, or it's part of his pretense of being simple, or he's gloating over his superior knowledge, or he's annoying her by pretending to misunderstand in a way that makes her look stupid.

and Gurloes couldn't be answering that.
'had it done' doesn't mean have it done to yourself. One can say 'I had the roof done' or, 'My car broke down, so I couldn't go, you see';

It's a common phrase, though I don't like it. I get 72,700 Google hits for "I've had my car break down" and 117,000 for "I had my car break down". The ones I looked at have no implication that the person wanted it to happen.

By the way, it's in character for Gurloes to use a non- standard expression like that. He says of the khaibits, "when they're laying down" (VII). Maybe this is part of his pretense of being a "dull creature".

in this case, Gurloes never having actually used the Revolutionary explains his reply best,

This may be one of those situations where different people think different readings are obvious.

and this also fits with the most-hallowed description.

"I couldn't describe it" may mean he's not allowed to; whether that's true or not, he certainly knows as well as Severian what it does. ?And I don't think "the most hallowed of all" implies anything about how often it's used.

Jerry Friedman

Hallowed things don't get used all the time. The Shroud of Turin is publicly displayed every decade or so; the relics of Aachen Cathedral annually; the Ethiopian's 'Ark of the Covenant' never.

But those things have no practical use.

Not to mention, if they were routinely using it, wouldn't it be broken? The guns are headed that way, and guns seem more reliable than whatever the Revolutionary is - the relatively simple mechanical engraver is already broken beyond their ability to repair.

A piece of electrical equipment might well last longer. And sometimes the things that don't get used break down. (I hope my turntable's ears are burning.)

(I also searched through the 4 books; the Revolutionary is only mentioned 3 or 4 times after that, and always in a Thecla context.)

But that's true of Allowin's necklace and the kite, too.

Gurloes seems to use "hallowed" as a synonym for "old", which tells us something about he (and Commonwealth people in general) see things. I'm not sure we can draw any conclusions from it beyond that.

Jerry Friedman

David Stockhoff — 22 Nov 2009, 12:32 · follows Jerry Friedman

True. It's because Wolfe uses so many literary antecedents. AND bad puns. Both of which fit into the "duh" category---if you've read the author in question, or if you get the pun. What a huge project that would be ... ----- Message: 3 Date: Sat, 21 Nov 2009 20:26:40 -0600 From: Adam Thornton <adam at io.com> To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net> Subject: Re: (urth) The Guild's Revolutionary Message-ID: <84D73864-A63A-4CC8-AD9F-CF9C7B400D25 at io.com> Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii" On Nov 21, 2009, at 4:54

PM, David Stockhoff wrote:
Fascinating!

The "apparatus" is clearly a Kafka reference, and one that has been in my memory since I first I read that story as a child.

It strikes me that we could probably learn a lot if there were some way to get everything in Wolfe that seems obvious to some reader and pile all of those together in one place. For instance, I was all aboard the "Nessus is Buenos Aires" train when I read _BotNS_ first at 13 or 14, because I was also in the throes of a Borges phase and Master Ultan was obviously, clearly, no question about it, Borges. Same with "Baldanders."

Later I found out this might be controversial.

I strongly suspect if we actually put everything together that each reader had always said "Well, DUH, I didn't mention it because I thought everyone knew it already," then we'd actually discover a lot of stuff.

Sort-of-speaking-of-which as someone-who-likes-Baum-way-too-much (although I think Wolfe is just Plain Wrong about Ruth Plumly Thompson), man, "The Eyeflash Miracles" is brilliant.

Adam

David Stockhoff — 22 Nov 2009, 23:58 · follows David Stockhoff

Good thoughts ... ----- Message: 2 Date: Sat,
21 Nov 2009 21:56:08 -0800 (PST) From: Jerry Friedman
<jerry_friedman at yahoo.com> To: The Urth Mailing List
<urth at lists.urth.net> Subject: Re: (urth) The Guild's Revolutionary Message-ID:
<570010.61574.qm at web50704.mail.re2.yahoo.com> Content-Type: text/plain;
charset=iso-8859-1

I'm not so sure. Thecla says at the end of Ch. XII,
"It [the revolutionary, or the part of her that hates herself] is a thing from Erebus, from Abaia, a
fit companion for me. Vodalus..." I think she mentions those names because they're who she
supported or at least sympathized with. The self-hatred caused by the revolutionary may be
making her exaggerate, but it seems significant that she mentions Erebus and Abaia rather
than accusing herself of cowardly loyalty to the corrupt Commonwealth or selfishly enjoying her
position while others starved, or some such.

---Because it's the body that rebels against the mind, I would think that even rebels have some
idea of the nature of Erebus and Abaia, and Erebus and Abaia must be emblems of rebellion to
most people. And therefore I'd think that the technology came from the stars, and that's simply
what she's saying.

But if "it" refers to her own personal rebel, not the device---I like that. Thecla sees the nature of
her punishment clearly, in that case. So it's just like the Kafka machine---it teaches as it
punishes and kills. See next ...

...

However, I think the revolutionary got its name because that's what it does--it's not a pun at all.
It creates something that overthrows the mind's governance of itself. And to the people of the
Commonwealth, this is an entirely fitting punishment for treason (which is probably what Thecla
is condemned for, whether she's guilty or not). Letting the punishment fit the crime is important
to them-- not only does Thecla say that, but Palaemon tells Severian it would be "fitting" for him
to die by the revolutionary (XIII).

I think this answers David Stockhoff's question about
why they bother to use the revolutionary given that people don't know about it, so it doesn't
have deterrent value. Many people in our culture, including me, are consequentialists, but
people in the Commonwealth may not be so much. The fitness of the punishment is a good
enough reason without any useful consequences.

---Perfect! It fits with the Kafka device. In fact, that was probably a clue telling us that all the
devices should be read in a parallel manner---that they are all meant to "fit" the crime.

And of course words change over time in a sometimes punlike way. If "revolutionary" doesn't
quite fit to our ears---it shouldn't.

...

I partially agree with David Stockhoff here. Gurloes is pretending to misunderstand because he
has some reason not to tell Thecla how her punishment works. (Earlier she asks whether he
plans to explain whatever will be used on her, and he says, "No, no, I wouldn't do that.")

I'm not sure what his reason is, though. Maybe it's
some kind of politeness or consideration, as David

suggests, or maybe he's not allowed to, or it's part of his pretense of being simple, or he's gloating over his superior knowledge, or he's annoying her by pretending to misunderstand in a way that makes her look stupid.

---Thanks for reminding me of that bit of dialog---I looked it up and I'm even more convinced Gurloes simply didn't want to be, in a sense, "crude." :)

...

But that's true of Allowin's necklace and the kite, too.

Gurloes seems to use "hallowed" as a synonym for "old", which tells us something about he (and Commonwealth people in general) see things. I'm not sure we can draw any conclusions from it beyond that.

---I agree.

Jerry Friedman

Jerry Friedman — 23 Nov 2009, 06:05 · in reply to David Stockhoff

--- On Sun, 11/22/09, David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:

Thanks for the kind words!

----- Message: 2 Date: Sat, 21 Nov
2009 21:56:08 -0800 (PST) From: Jerry Friedman

...

I'm not so sure. Thecla says at the end of Ch. XII, "It [the revolutionary, or the part of her that hates herself] is a thing from Erebus, from Abaia, a fit companion for me. Vodalus..."? I think she mentions those names because they're who she supported or at least sympathized with. The self-hatred caused by the revolutionary may be making her exaggerate, but it seems significant that she mentions Erebus and Abaia rather than accusing herself of cowardly loyalty to the corrupt Commonwealth or selfishly enjoying her position while others starved, or some such.

---Because it's the body that rebels against the mind, I would think that even rebels have some idea of the nature of Erebus and Abaia, and Erebus and Abaia must be emblems of rebellion to most people. And therefore I'd think that the technology came from the stars, and that's simply what she's saying.

I hadn't thought that it meant the technology came from the stars--an interesting point.

But still, from what you said, the punishment seems fit for her only if she is or sees herself as a rebel.

But if "it" refers to her own personal rebel, not the device---I like that. Thecla sees the nature of her punishment clearly, in that case. So it's just like the Kafka machine---it teaches as it punishes and kills. See next ...

...

Your mentioning teaching reminds me that the torturers are the Seekers of Truth and Penitence--not deterrence or retribution.

By the way, while rereading to look these things up, I finally realized why it sounded familiar when the lochage told Severian that if he didn't cover his clothes, he'd cause a riot. It was reminiscent of a scene in John Brunner's */Stand on Zanzibar/*, where the mere presence of one of the main characters (Norman House) in the wrong part of the city causes so much tension, which he's unaware of, that a slight provocation sets off a riot.

Jerry Friedman

Mo Holkar / UKG — 23 Nov 2009, 10:46 · in reply to Adam Thornton

At 02:26 22/11/2009, you wrote:

It strikes me that we could probably learn a lot if there were some way to get everything in Wolfe that seems obvious to some reader and pile all of those together in one place. For instance, I was all aboard the "Nessus is Buenos Aires" train when I read *_BotNS_* first at 13 or 14, because I was also in the throes of a Borges phase and Master Ultan was obviously, clearly, no question about it, Borges. Same with "Baldanders."

Later I found out this might be controversial.

I strongly suspect if we actually put everything together that each reader had always said "Well, DUH, I didn't mention it because I thought everyone knew it already," then we'd actually discover a lot of stuff.

Someone (Dan'!?) a while ago started a plot summary of *BotNS* on the Wolfe Wiki -- that might be a good place to accumulate such references. At the moment it just has a para for each chapter, but it would make sense to either link those through to a more detailed page, or add such material to this page:
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=TheShadowOfTheTorturer.DetailedSummary>

best wishes,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

Jeff Wilson — 23 Nov 2009, 11:30 · in reply to David Stockhoff

David Stockhoff wrote:

It used to drive me crazy that the Revolutionary doesn't spin, but I agree that the pun solution is unavoidable. However, it's notable that Thecla doesn't already know how it works. It may or may not be used only on high-ranking rebels, but you'd think some word would have gotten out among such people that the Revolutionary awaited them---or else why use it?

It's less of a pun than a Dantean contrapasso, I would say.

On the other hand, perhaps it is rare that the Guild gets such people at all, and therefore it uses the device only rarely.

Like most activities on Urth, "tradition" is probably the largest reason.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Adam Thornton — 23 Nov 2009, 13:59 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On Nov 23, 2009, at 5:30 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

It's less of a pun than a Dantean contrapasso, I would say.

Potato/dried tuber.

Adam

James Wynn — 23 Nov 2009, 14:00 · in reply to Adam Thornton

For instance, I was all aboard the "Nessus is Buenos Aires" train when I read _BotNS_ first at 13 or 14, because I was also in the throes of a Borges phase and Master Ultan was obviously, clearly, no question about it, Borges. Same with "Baldanders."
Later I found out this might be controversial.

I've always thought the Borges=Ultan theory was tenuous. Not impossible, just not much supporting it beyond Ultan's blindness. Borges is a great writer, but other than "The Book of Imaginary Beings" which cites the Baldanders, I haven't noted much influence from him. Of course, that might be due to a deficiency in my Borges knowledge.

I strongly suspect if we actually put everything together that each reader had always said "Well, DUH, I didn't mention it because I thought everyone knew it already," then we'd actually discover a lot of stuff.

Okay. While Wolfe might well have been introduced to the monster "Baldanders" by Borges, it comes from the Renaissance fantasy story "Simplicius Simplicissimus". <looks over at it sitting on his shelf right> According to the story, the name means "first one thing and then another" because, like the wizard Taleisan, it is always changing into other things. Although I can think of several reasons why Wolfe might have been attracted to a "successive monster", as Borges calls it, I have no idea how this relates to Wolfe's Frankenstein.

J.

Mark Millman — 23 Nov 2009, 15:21 · in reply to James Wynn

Dear Mr. Wynn,

On Monday 23 November 2009, you wrote:
I've always thought the Borges=Ultan

theory was tenuous. Not impossible,
just not much supporting it beyond
Utlán's blindness. . . .

There's also the fact that both Utlán and Borges were national librarians of their respective countries.

Okay. While Wolfe might well have been introduced to the monster "Baldanders" by Borges, it comes from the Renaissance fantasy story "Simplicius Simplicissimus". <looks over at it sitting on his shelf right> According to the story, the name means "first one thing and then another" because, like the wizard Talei-san, it is always changing into other things. Although I can think of several reasons why Wolfe might have been attracted to a "successive monster", as Borges calls it, I have no idea how this relates to Wolfe's *Frankenstein*.

I have two different editions of the *Simplicissimus*, both of which lack the sixth book in which, according to Borges, Baldanders appears.

What edition do you have, and who prepared it? I'd like to look for a copy of my own.

For those list members who haven't encountered it, the *Simplicissimus* is a sort of German *Candide* set during the Thirty Years' War. The sixth book, which was added late in the author's life, is, as I understand it, considerably more fantastic than the novel's preceding books, although there are fantastic episodes earlier, with a particularly long one falling in the fifth book. My guess is that modern editors are primarily interested in the work's realistic aspects and omit the sixth book as an inferior late addition. While it's not well known in the English-speaking world today (although I just found an on-line version at <http://rbsche.people.wm.edu/teaching/grimmelshausen/> and there are a couple of reasonably accurate Wikipedia articles on it and its author), many German authorities consider it to be the beginning of the modern German novel tradition.

J.

Best,

Mark Millman

John Watkins — 23 Nov 2009, 15:25 · in reply to Mark Millman

Mark, thanks for sharing that. Had I ever looked to a copy of the book for the reference and not found the chapter, I would've assumed Borges had invented the conceit as an extra, "secret" chapter. Now I'll never make that mistake.

On Mon, Nov 23, 2009 at 10:21 AM, Mark Millman <markjmillman at gmail.com> wrote:
Dear Mr. Wynn,

On Monday 23 November 2009, you wrote:

I've always thought the Borges=Utlán
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just not much supporting it beyond
Utlán's blindness. . . .

There's also the fact that both Ulton and Borges were national librarians of their respective countries.

Okay. While Wolfe might well have been introduced to the monster "Baldanders" by Borges, it comes from the Renaissance fantasy story "Simplicius Simplicissimus". <looks over at it sitting on his shelf right> According to the story, the name means "first one thing and then another" because, like the wizard Talei-san, it is always changing into other things. Although I can think of several reasons why Wolfe might have been attracted to a "successive monster", as Borges calls it, I have no idea how this relates to Wolfe's Frankenstein.

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J.

Best,

Mark Millman

Gwern Branwen — 23 Nov 2009, 16:11 · in reply to James Wynn

On Mon, Nov 23, 2009 at 9:00 AM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

For instance, I was all aboard the "Nessus is Buenos Aires" train when I read _BotNS_ first at 13 or 14, because I was also in the throes of a Borges phase and Master Ulton was obviously, clearly, no question about it, Borges. ?Same with "Baldanders."
Later I found out this might be controversial.

I've always thought the Borges=Ulton theory was tenuous. Not impossible, just not much supporting it beyond Ulton's blindness. Borges is a great writer, but other than "The Book of Imaginary Beings" which cites the Baldanders, I haven't noted much influence from him. Of course, that might be due to a deficiency in my Borges knowledge.

Well, besides all the many gobsmackingly obvious parallels, I believe Wolfe in interviews has said as much (I'm sure I've read him say Ultan=Borges in some of the interviews in *_Shadows of the New Sun_*, although I'm not sure which one of my photocopies has it).

gwern

Mark Millman — 23 Nov 2009, 16:15 · in reply to John Watkins

Dear John,

On Monday 23 November 2009, you wrote:

Mark, thanks for sharing that. Had I ever looked to a copy of the book for the reference and not found the chapter, I would've assumed Borges had invented the conceit a an extra, "secret" chapter. Now I'll never make that mistake.

I cannot, you should note, verify the sixth book's existence from my own experience, and had myself half-believed it to be an invention of Borges'. But Mr. Wynn's statement implies that his copy includes it, and I seem to recall that some of the criticism I've read has referred to it. For that matter, without Mr. Wynn's note, I might also think that Borges had created Baldanders and claimed that he appears in the really extant but rarely encountered sixth book, which strikes me as an even more Borgesian thing to do than does making up the sixth book wholesale.

Best,

Mark Millman

James Wynn — 23 Nov 2009, 16:23 · in reply to Mark Millman

I have two different editions of the *Simplicissimus*, both of which lack the sixth book in which, according to Borges, Baldanders appears. What edition do you have, and who prepared it? I'd like to look for a copy of my own.

Mine is translated by George Schultz-Behrend and published by Bobbs-Merrill "Library of Liberal Arts". Yellow paperback. Red titling. HOWEVER, because the translator believed chapters 2-18 would bore the modern reader, he summarizes them. Until I read the introduction just now, I assume these summaries were merely all that was extant of the text. This is his summary of the Baldanders chapter:

"ON a walk through the woods Simplicius finds a life-sized statue. It looks like an old German hero; and when he tries to turn it over, it begins to speak, saying its name is "Soon-different," who has always been with him and who will not leave him until he dies. It gives Simplicius a recipe for conversing with lifeless objects and , as if for fun, changes into about a dozen different shapes, but always remains its own true Soondifferent self. Having changed into a bird, it flies away."

Borges tells us that one of the things it changes into is a secretary that writes "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." And this phrase is the key to a coded document that tells Simplicius how to talk to lifeless objects ("chairs, benches, pots and kettles"). He also says that the Baldanders can change into a man, oak, sow, sausage, meadow full of clover, dung, flower, flowering branch, mulberry tree, silk tapestry, and "many other things". It's coat of arms is the "inconstant moon".

Here's the cover of the first edition of Book 6 with a picture of the Baldanders.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/1c/Simplicissimus_Cover_page1669.jpg/140px-Simplicissimus_Cover_page1669.jpg

O'Donnell, Tim BOSI — 23 Nov 2009, 16:26 · follows Mark Millman

From: "James Wynn" <crushtv at gmail.com>

To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>

Subject: Re: (urth) The Guild's Revolutionary

Message-ID: <CB1CCF052BBA41FABC5DAC6EE841F2BE at eMachinePC> Content-Type: text/plain; format=flowed; charset="iso-8859-1";

reply-type=original

For instance, I was all aboard the "Nessus is Buenos Aires" train when I read _BotNS_ first at 13 or 14, because I was also in the throes of a Borges phase and Master Utlan was obviously, clearly, no question about it, Borges. Same with "Baldanders."

Later I found out this might be controversial.

I've always thought the Borges=Utlán theory was tenuous. Not impossible, just not much supporting it beyond Utlán's blindness. Borges is a great writer, but other than "The Book of Imaginary Beings" which cites the Baldanders, I haven't noted much influence from him. Of course, that might be due to a deficiency in my Borges knowledge.

In terms of Borges influencing Wolfe (in general and BOTNS in particular), the Borges story Funes the Memorious features a character who remembers everything in perfect detail, full text available here: <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/borges.htm>

Gene Wolfe has also commented on the influence of Borges:

GW: Yes, I took the name of the giant who is still growing from The Book of Imaginary Beings, which may not be Borges's best work but which I felt free to steal from disgracefully because even second-rate Borges is very good indeed. Borges is capable of making up much better books and monsters and authors than anyone can find in libraries.

Source: http://www.themodernword.com/borges/borges_infl_wolfe.html

James Wynn — 23 Nov 2009, 17:17 · in reply to O'Donnell, Tim BOSI

I've always thought the Borges=Utlán theory was tenuous. Not impossible, just not much supporting it beyond Utlán's blindness. Borges is a great writer, but other than "The Book of Imaginary Beings" which cites the Baldanders, I haven't noted much influence from him. Of course, that might be due to a deficiency in my Borges knowledge.[snip]While Wolfe might well have been introduced to the monster "Baldanders" by Borges...

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[snip]

Gene Wolfe has also commented on the influence of Borges:

GW: Yes, I took the name of the giant who is still growing from The Book of Imaginary Beings

Well, that certainly settles where he got the name, although how it relates to Wolfe's constantly growing giant is still a mystery to me.

And also Borges was a blind librarian of South America. Even if one happily embraced the theory that Buenos Aires is Nessus, that's still a thin hook to hang a theory that Ultan was patterned on Borges...not that I don't *like* the theory and it certainly does no harm. But while I heard and read Wolfe repeatedly allude to Chesterton and Vance being "influences" (and he explicitly identified *The Dying Earth* as his "golden book"), I've never heard him say that about Borges. It seems such a grand honor to give to another writer (some have even associated Cyby with Wolfe himself). It suggests an association greater than mere professional and artistic admiration.

By the way, does anyone have the lyrics to 70s folk band Ougenweide's song "Bald Anders"?

J.

James B. Jordan — 23 Nov 2009, 17:28 · in reply to James Wynn

It's been a while, but it seems to me that Ultan's library contains a book that contains all other books. If so, that's the aleph book from Borges.

Nutria (are you guys still using such names?) JBJordan

At 11:17 AM 11/23/2009, you wrote:

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GW: Yes, I took the name of the giant who is still growing from *The Book of Imaginary Beings*

Well, that certainly settles where he got the name, although how it relates to Wolfe's constantly growing giant is still a mystery to me.

And also Borges was a blind librarian of South America. Even if one happily embraced the theory that Buenos Aires is Nessus, that's still a thin hook to hang a theory that Ultan was patterned on Borges...not that I don't *like* the theory and it certainly does no harm. But while I heard and read Wolfe repeatedly allude to Chesterton and Vance being "influences" (and he explicitly identified *The Dying Earth* as his "golden book"), I've never heard him say that about Borges. It seems such a grand honor to give to another writer (some have even associated Cyby with Wolfe himself). It suggests an association greater than mere professional and artistic admiration.

By the way, does anyone have the lyrics to 70s folk band Ougenweide's song "Bald Anders"?

J.

Gwern Branwen — 23 Nov 2009, 17:45 · in reply to James B. Jordan

On Mon, Nov 23, 2009 at 12:28 PM, James B. Jordan <jbjordan4 at cox.net> wrote:
It's been a while, but it seems to me that Ultan's library contains a book
that contains all other books. If so, that's the aleph book from Borges.

Nutria (are you guys still using such names?) JBJordan

Fortunately, that's not quite it - even Borges's Library of Babel doesn't contain itself.
(Something of a contradiction.)

What I think you're referring to:

"There is a cube of crystal here - though I can no longer tell you where - no larger than the ball
of your thumb that contains more books than the library itself does. Though a harlot might
dangle it from one ear for an ornament, there are not volumes enough in the world to
counterweight the other."

gwern

Mark Millman — 23 Nov 2009, 17:55 · in reply to James Wynn

Dear Mr. Wynn,

Thank you very much for this information.

I agree; it's all too common for modern editors to summarize those chapters that deal with the
fantastic. One of the editions I have does that, and it's very frustrating.

Best,

Mark Millman

On Monday 23 November 2009, you wrote:
Mine is translated by George Schultz-
Behrend and published by Bobbs-Merrill
"Library of Liberal Arts". Yellow paper-
back. Red titling. HOWEVER, because
the translator believed chapters 2-18
would bore the modern reader, he sum-
marizes them. Until I read the introduc-
tion just now, I assume these summaries
were merely all that was extant of the
text. This is his summary of the Baldan-
ders chapter:

"ON a walk through the woods Simplicius
finds a life-sized statue. It looks like an
old German hero; and when he tries to
turn it over, it begins to speak, saying its
name is "Soon-different," who has always
been with him and who will not leave him
until he dies. It gives Simplicius a recipe
for conversing with lifeless objects and,

as if for fun, changes into about a dozen different shapes, but always remains its own true Soondifferent self. Having changed into a bird, it flies away."

Borges tells us that one of the things it changes into is a secretary that writes "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." ?And this phrase is the key to a coded document that tells Simplicius how to talk to lifeless objects ("chairs, benches, pots and kettles"). He also says that the Baldanders can change into a ?man, oak, sow, sausage, meadow full of clover, dung, flower, flowering branch, mulberry tree, silk tapestry, and "many other things". Its coat of arms is the "inconstant moon".

Here's the cover of the first edition of Book 6 with a picture of the Baldanders.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/1c/Simplicissimus_Cover_page1669.jpg/140px-Simplicissimus_Cover_page1669.jpg

David Duffy — 24 Nov 2009, 03:15 · in reply to James Wynn

On Mon, 23 Nov 2009, James Wynn wrote:

not much supporting it beyond Utlan's blindness. Borges is a great writer, but other than "The Book of Imaginary Beings" which cites the Baldanders, I haven't noted much influence from him. Of course, that might be due to a deficiency in my Borges knowledge.

Father Inire echoes "The Book of Imaginary Beings" section on fauna of mirrors.

Borges has:

"the Fish was a shifting and shining creature that nobody had ever caught but that many said they had glimpsed in the depths of mirrors...The first to awaken will be the Fish. Deep in the mirror we will perceive a very faint line and the color of this line will be like no other color."

David Duffy.

James Wynn — 24 Nov 2009, 04:03 · in reply to David Duffy

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faint line and the color of this line will be like no other color."

Look, I'm not saying Wolfe hasn't read Borges, nor even that he doesn't like him. Nor that he hasn't drawn from The Book of Imaginary Beings. I know he has (even though he has apparently disparaged that little book somewhat). I'm speaking specifically of Master Ultan. It's a cool little concept to say "Oh, Wolfe had Borges play that roll." It'd be neat to find all my favorite authors on Urth. But if Ultan wasn't blind, no one would identify him with Borges either by his looks or words. And so essentially the argument is that Ultan=Borges because Ultan is a blind librarian. But Palaemon is blind too, right? Who is he? So where is Vance? Don't you think he deserves to be here? Or Chesterton?

J.

David Duffy — 24 Nov 2009, 04:54 · in reply to James Wynn

On Mon, 23 Nov 2009, James Wynn wrote:

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Look, I'm not saying Wolfe hasn't read Borges, nor even that he doesn't like him. Nor that he hasn't drawn from The Book of Imaginary Beings. I know he has (even though he has apparently disparaged that little book somewhat).

I was just addressing:

"I haven't noted much influence from him."

I'm

speaking specifically of Master Ultan. It's a cool little concept to say "Oh, Wolfe had Borges play that role." It'd be neat to find all my favorite authors on Urth. But if Ultan wasn't blind, no one would identify him with Borges either by his looks or words. And so essentially the argument is that Ultan=Borges because Ultan is a blind librarian. But Palaemon is blind too, right? Who is he? So where is Vance? Don't you think he deserves to be here? Or Chesterton?

One might argue that the choice of a fantastical South America is due to reading Borges, rather than Chesterton or Vance. And how would one recognize the latter two, as opposed to a blind librarian in a labyrinthine library?

But yes, I would agree that there are no completely definitive clues to identifying models for anyone in the books. Even Neil Armstrong ;)

Cheers, David Duffy.

| David Duffy (MBBS PhD) ,_-_\

| email: davidD at qimr.edu.au ph: INT+61+7+3362-0217 fax: -0101 / *

| Epidemiology Unit, Queensland Institute of Medical Research _-._/

Adam Thornton — 24 Nov 2009, 04:58 · in reply to David Duffy

On Nov 23, 2009, at 10:54 PM, David Duffy wrote:

One might argue that the choice of a fantastical South America is due to reading Borges, rather than Chesterton or Vance. And how would one recognize the latter two, as opposed to a blind librarian in a labyrinthine library?

Well, Chesterton would be a big fat dude with a cloak and a sword cane.

Vance, I dunno.

Adam

Jeff Wilson — 24 Nov 2009, 07:56 · in reply to Adam Thornton

Adam Thornton wrote:

On Nov 23, 2009, at 5:30 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

It's less of a pun than a Dantean contrapasso, I would say.

Potato/dried tuber.

Adam

Goodness, is it my turn in the barrel again already?

I'm not sure what you mean by that answer, could you please explain it at greater length, Adam?

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

don doggett — 24 Nov 2009, 08:02 · in reply to James Wynn

Hey all,

One of the great things about this list, and about Wolfe in general, are the tangents you end up traveling on. God love google, I typed in Ulster and Borges (looking for an Ultan connection) and I came up with this:

<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/pdf/fishburn.pdf> a 280 page Dictionary of Borges with a hyperlinked (I think that's right?) index. It has nothing to do with Ultan, as far as I can tell (though the word Ulster is somewhere in the document. heh) but who really cares. This is damn cool.

you're welcome

Don

Doggerel
www.don-doggett.blogspot.com

--- On Mon, 11/23/09, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
From: James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com>
Subject: Re: (urth) Borges

To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>

Date: Monday, November 23, 2009, 10:17 AM

I've always thought the

Borges=Utan theory was tenuous.

Not impossible, just not much supporting it beyond Utlan's

blindness. Borges is a great writer, but other than

"The Book of

Imaginary Beings" which cites the Baldanders, I

haven't noted much

influence from him. Of course, that might be due to a deficiency in

my Borges knowledge.[snip]While Wolfe might well have been

introduced to the monster "Baldanders" by

Borges...

In terms of Borges influencing Wolfe (in general and BOTNS in particular),

the Borges story Funes the Memorious features a character who

remembers everything in perfect detail

[snip]

Gene Wolfe has also commented on the influence of Borges:

GW: Yes, I took the name of the giant who is still growing from

The Book of Imaginary Beings

Well, that certainly settles where he got the name, although how it relates

to Wolfe's constantly growing giant is still a mystery to me.

And also Borges was a blind librarian of South America.

Even if one happily

embraced the theory that Buenos Aires is Nessus, that's

still a thin hook to

hang a theory that Utan was patterned on Borges...not that I don't *like*

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repeatedly allude to Chesterton and Vance being

"influences" (and he

explicitly identified The Dying Earth as his "golden book"), I've never

heard him say that about Borges. It seems such a grand honor to give to

another writer (some have even associated Cyby with Wolfe himself). It

suggests an association greater than mere professional and artistic

admiration.

By the way, does anyone have the lyrics to 70s folk band

Ougenweide's song

"Bald Anders"?

J.

Adam Thornton — 24 Nov 2009, 14:15 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On Nov 24, 2009, at 1:56 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

Adam Thornton wrote:

On Nov 23, 2009, at 5:30 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

It's less of a pun than a Dantean contrapasso, I would say.

Potato/dried tuber.

Adam

Goodness, is it my turn in the barrel again already?

I'm not sure what you mean by that answer, could you please explain it at greater length, Adam?

Oh, all right, if you insist.

I started from "potato/po-tah-toe", which is to say, one man's pun is another's Dantean contrapasso. Only then I got to thinking about The Waste Land, largely because of one of my own works in progress riffs on it a lot and it's been on my mind, since it is another highly allusive work. And that in turn suggested that one man's potato is another man's dried tuber (first few lines of TWL).

Martin Rowson, in his graphical novel of the same name (a charming mashup of The Waste Land and The Big Sleep with nods to other noir pieces) further did a tremendously funny dried tuber/dried tuba visual pun, but the margin was too small to contain it.

Adam

Jonathan Goodwin — 24 Nov 2009, 16:14 · in reply to Adam Thornton

Those rhotic among us are unlikely to get this right away.

On Tue, Nov 24, 2009 at 8:15 AM, Adam Thornton <adam at io.com> wrote:

On Nov 24, 2009, at 1:56 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

Adam Thornton wrote:

On Nov 23, 2009, at 5:30 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

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Adam

Jeff Wilson — 24 Nov 2009, 19:06 · in reply to Adam Thornton

Adam Thornton wrote:

On Nov 24, 2009, at 1:56 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

Adam Thornton wrote:

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Oh, all right, if you insist.

I started from "potato/po-tah-toe", which is to say, one man's pun is another's Dantean contrapasso.

Oh, that I agree with. "The Revolutionary" is a pun on the part of whoever on Urth gave it that name, while at the functional level it is a contrapasso. The author chooses both, but the device of putting the pun in the characters' mouths leaves the work with more dignity than if it were a third person narrator cracking wise.

Jeff Wilson - [jwilson at io.com](mailto:jwilson@io.com)

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