

Seventeen

The Urth list — 10 messages, 8 voices, 23 May 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6018>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Nicholas Gevers — 23 May 2011, 09:43

A possible reference by Wolfe is to the Dutch East India Company of the 17th and 18th centuries, which was governed by a board of managers or factors called the "Heere Seventien" or Group of Seventeen. Given the Company's association with the sea, and origin in a country partly reclaimed from the sea, Wolfe might have intended a coded pelagic reference, thus to Abaia, Scylla, and the rest. The DEIC didn't have a very savoury reputation. Of course, the only overt reference to the Dutch in the entire Briah Cycle is in **On Blue's Waters** and **Return to the Whorl**, with Dorp and its doughty sailors...

--Nick Gevers.

António Pedro Marques — 23 May 2011, 10:48 · in reply to Nicholas Gevers

Nicholas Gevers wrote (23-05-2011 10:43):

A possible reference by Wolfe is to the Dutch East India Company of the 17th and 18th centuries, which was governed by a board of managers or factors called the "Heere Seventien" or Group of Seventeen. Given the Company's association with the sea, and origin in a country partly reclaimed from the sea, Wolfe might have intended a coded pelagic reference, thus to Abaia, Scylla, and the rest. The DEIC didn't have a very savoury reputation. Of course, the only overt reference to the Dutch in the entire Briah Cycle is in **On Blue's Waters** and **Return to the Whorl**, with Dorp and its doughty sailors...

Yet one in which he explicitly decries the outcome of a society giving absolute power to inflexible Law and its enforcers...

David Stockhoff — 23 May 2011, 12:09 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

Nice. Thanks Nicholas!

On 5/23/2011 6:48 AM, António Pedro Marques wrote:
Nicholas Gevers wrote (23-05-2011 10:43):

A possible reference by Wolfe is to the Dutch East India Company of the 17th and 18th centuries, which was governed by a board of managers or factors called the "Heere Seventien" or Group of Seventeen. Given the Company's association with the sea, and origin in a country partly reclaimed from the sea, Wolfe might have intended a coded pelagic reference, thus to Abaia, Scylla, and the rest. The DEIC didn't have a very savoury reputation. Of course, the only overt reference to the Dutch in the entire Briah Cycle is in **On Blue's Waters** and **Return to*

the Whorl*, with Dorp and its doughty sailors...

Yet one in which he explicitly decries the outcome of a society giving absolute power to inflexible Law and its enforcers...

Lee Berman — 23 May 2011, 13:25 · follows David Stockhoff

I like David's theory about 17 being a nice counterpart to 12 in a gnostic parody of Earth (which I roundly think Urth is meant to be).

Still, I don't feel the need to leave it at that. For me the the Group of 17 might also refer to the communist nations at the time of BotNS writing: USSR, China, Cuba, N. Korea, N. Vietnam, Mongolia, Cambodia, Laos, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, E. Germany, Albania and Yemen. (the # gets bigger if you want to add some short-lived African communist states)

With regard to the origin of megatherians, I'm coming around to the notion that they are all human in origin. Jibes with the "Man is created in God's image" religious idea. Aliens are always some form of mutated human, be they Abaia or Famulimus.

I think Wolfe tries to show us the progression. It always starts with a bid for immortality. Typhon with his body grafts. Baldanders with his eternal growth. Even Tzadkiel with his escape to the next universe.

But by definition, becoming immortal means losing one's humanity. Thus Baldanders' and Typhon's cruelty. Even Tzadkiel must resort to genocide. Baldanders is losing his hearing. Typhon loses his whole body. Pig is blind and the Godling has eyes so small we must guess he will lose his sight with further growth.

We aren't given a lot of face time with the final products, but I think we get enough with Tzadkiel, The Mother and Great Scylla to conclude that when these former human-types get big enough they can pinch off human-sized agents to accomplish what they, in their large bulk, cannot. We never see Abaia but it is implied he can do the same thing. The cold pale warriors, the pandours, are a similar product of Erebus I think.

(James, you implied that there is evidence in BotNS for Erebus being long dead. Could you outline this?)

Andrew Mason — 23 May 2011, 17:45 · follows Lee Berman

By the way, there is a fourth seventeen in the story: it is mentioned in the old Borski post that was linked to. There are seventeen cells on each row in the Matachin Tower. I think it would be hard to work out an in-story connection between this and the other seventeens, though there may still be a symbolic connection in Wolfe's thought.

Nathan C. Tresch — 26 May 2011, 23:51 · in reply to Lee Berman

Can someone explain to me why the idea that the Ascians have anything to do with communism is so popular? He attributed his inspiration for the Ascians to the Turks of the Byzantine period of history, and points out that they are north american in origin in this interview:

<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/wolfe46interview.htm>

<<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/wolfe46interview.htm>>Further, the idea that it takes a totalitarian society to produce a culture where only certain slogans can be used to communicate seems specious. I think it's just as likely that formalism and political correctness taken to an extreme could produce such a culture, or that some kind of mass media which spread slogans, (like the internet spreading memes), could also be the impetus.

On Mon, May 23, 2011 at 6:25 AM, Lee Berman <[severfiansola at hotmail.com](mailto:severfiansola@hotmail.com)>wrote:

I like David's theory about 17 being a nice counterpart to 12 in a gnostic parody of Earth (which I roundly think Urth is meant to be).

Still, I don't feel the need to leave it at that. For me the the Group of 17 might also refer to the communist nations at the time of BotNS writing: USSR, China, Cuba, N. Korea, N. Vietnam, Mongolia, Cambodia, Laos, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, E. Germany, Albania and Yemen. (the # gets bigger if you want to add some short-lived African communist states)

With regard to the origin of megatherians, I'm coming around to the notion that they are all human in origin. Jibes with the "Man is created in God's image" religious idea. Aliens are always some form of mutated human, be they Abaia or Famulimus.

I think Wolfe tries to show us the progression. It always starts with a bid for immortality. Typhon with his body grafts. Baldanders with his eternal growth. Even Tzadkiel with his escape to the next universe.

But by definition, becoming immortal means losing one's humanity. Thus Baldanders' and Typhon's cruelty. Even Tzadkiel must resort to genocide. Baldanders is losing his hearing. Typhon loses his whole body. Pig is blind and the Godling has eyes so small we must guess he will lose his sight with further growth.

We aren't given a lot of face time with the final products, but I think we get enough with Tzadkiel, The Mother and Great Scylla to conclude that when these former human-types get big enough they can pinch off human-sized agents to accomplish what they, in their large bulk, cannot. We never see Abaia but it is implied he can do the same thing. The cold pale warriors, the pandours, are a similar product of

Erebus I think.

(James, you implied that there is evidence in BotNS for Erebus being long dead. Could you outline this?)

David Stockhoff — 27 May 2011, 00:04 · in reply to Nathan C. Tresch

Well, Wolfe was in Korea, so regardless of the actual political system that created them (and their battle formations don't seem very Communist), one may imagine being impressed for a lifetime by the implacableness of the Chinese army when they crossed the Yalu in winter, and that this might influence anyone greatly.

But since the Internet was not around in the 1970s, we are left with (a) Communist slogans (b) ad slogans as a source of total social brainwashing. From the soldier's tale, Ascia certainly sounds more like China than Madison Avenue, to me.

On 5/26/2011 7:51 PM, Nathan C. Tresch wrote:

Can someone explain to me why the idea that the Ascians have anything to do with communism is so popular? He attributed his inspiration for the Ascians to the Turks of the Byzantine period of history, and points out that they are north american in origin in this interview:

<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/wolfe46interview.htm>

Further, the idea that it takes a totalitarian society to produce a culture where only certain slogans can be used to communicate seems specious. I think it's just as likely that formalism and political correctness taken to an extreme could produce such a culture, or that some kind of mass media which spread slogans, (like the internet spreading memes), could also be the impetus.

On Mon, May 23, 2011 at 6:25 AM, Lee Berman <severfiansola at hotmail.com <mailto:severfiansola at hotmail.com>> wrote:

I like David's theory about 17 being a nice counterpart to 12 in a gnostic parody of Earth (which I roundly think Urth is meant to be).

Still, I don't feel the need to leave it at that. For me the the Group of 17 might also refer to the communist nations at the time of BotNS writing: USSR, China, Cuba, N. Korea, N. Vietnam, Mongolia, Cambodia, Laos, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, E. Germany, Albania and Yemen. (the # gets bigger if you want to add some short-lived African communist states)

With regard to the origin of megatherians, I'm coming around to the notion that they are all human in origin. Jibes with the "Man is created in God's image" religious idea. Aliens are always some form of mutated human, be they Abaia or Famulimus.

I think Wolfe tries to show us the progression. It always starts with a bid for immortality. Typhon

with his body grafts. Baldanders with his eternal growth. Even Tzadkiel with his escape to the next universe.

But by definition, becoming immortal means losing one's humanity. Thus Baldanders' and Typhon's cruelty. Even Tzadkiel must resort to genocide. Baldanders is losing his hearing. Typhon loses his whole body. Pig is blind and the Godling has eyes so small we must guess he will lose his sight with further growth.

We aren't given a lot of face time with the final products, but I think we get enough with Tzadkiel, The Mother and Great Scylla to conclude that when these former human-types get big enough they can pinch off human-sized agents to accomplish what they, in their large bulk, cannot. We never see Abaia but it is implied he can do the same thing. The cold pale warriors, the pandours, are a similar product of Erebus I think.

(James, you implied that there is evidence in BotNS for Erebus being long dead. Could you outline this?)

Gwern Branwen — 27 May 2011, 00:39 · in reply to Nathan C. Tresch

On Thu, May 26, 2011 at 7:51 PM, Nathan C. Tresch

<nathanctresch at gmail.com> wrote:

He attributed his inspiration for the Ascians to the Turks of the Byzantine period of history, and points out that they are north american in origin in this interview:

<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/wolfe46interview.htm>

Not quite. He said they were 'my equivalents of the Turk' to the 'stagnant political entity' of the Commonwealth. That is, Byzantium:Turks :: Commonwealth:Ascians. This is **not** the same thing as 'the society of the the Ascians is a version of the Ottoman caliphate'.

Personally, the very first time I read TBotNS, it was obvious to me that the Group of Seventeen's society was heavily modeled on communist China. The parallels are just too many.

The style of the story is focused on an agriculture society on what may be a collectivized farm (China's usual mindset, and especially that of Mao who swam in the sea of peasants), the Group of Seventeen is appealed to like the peasants appealed to distant mandarins and Party officials for justice*, the Group of Seventeen is even named like various Chinese entities - Gang of Four, anyone? -The use of numbers is again characteristically Chinese, if you don't believe me, look at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Chinese_numbered_policies or look at how many Chinese entries there are in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Numeric_epithets (This impression is particularly reinforced if you read any substantial amount of ancient Chinese literature/philosophy/history.) The quoting is a clever mockery of communist quoting and especially quoting from the Little Red Book (an approved text if ever there was one). The sentiments are in line with communist theory.

Hell, "correct thought" is literally a China term! Look through Google Books if you don't believe me, eg.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=ku5fABfvOGgC&pg=PA45&dq=%22correct+thought%22#v=onepage&q=%22correct%20thought%22&f=false>

So there are many many points in the story that reek of Chinese communism. And *not* of Islam or the Turks.

* Not just my observation; see

<http://crookedtimber.org/2009/03/07/loyal-to-the-group-of-seventeen/>

gwern

<http://www.gwern.net>

Lee Berman — 27 May 2011, 12:11 · follows Gwern Branwen

David Stockhoff: But since the Internet was not around in the 1970s, we are left with (a) Communist slogans (b) ad slogans as a source of total social brainwashing. From the soldier's tale, Ascia certainly sounds more like China than Madison Avenue, to me.

Yes, I would agree. Not only was the Cold War on in full force in the 70's, Gene Wolfe can be fairly labelled as having a history of a Cold Warrior. Not to suggest he was a blinder-on American patriot but at the time, communism was considered both a real threat and America's main enemy. In a Wolfe interview, I think he said that he set Ascia in N. America in part because he wanted to show, "it could happen here".

Nathan C. Tresch: I think it's just as likely that formalism and political correctness taken to an extreme could produce such a culture, or that some kind of mass media which spread slogans, (like the internet spreading memes), could also be the impetus.

Not disagreeing, necessarily, but that does sound like a very 21st century sentiment. The masses were not so considered as "sheeple" in the 70's. If they chose to adopt a popular slogan, that was free will, the opposite of communism.

Son of Witz — 07 Jun 2011, 22:21 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

On May 26, 2011, at 5:39 PM, Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

On Thu, May 26, 2011 at 7:51 PM, Nathan C. Tresch

<nathanctresch at gmail.com> wrote:

He attributed his inspiration for the Ascians to the Turks of the Byzantine period of history, and points out that they are north american in origin in this interview:

<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/wolfe46interview.htm>

Not quite. He said they were 'my equivalents of the Turk' to the 'stagnant political entity' of the Commonwealth. That is, Byzantium:Turks :: Commonwealth:Ascians. This is *not* the same thing as 'the society of the the Ascians is a version of the Ottoman caliphate'.

Personally, the very first time I read TBotNS, it was obvious to me that the Group of Seventeen's society was heavily modeled on communist China. The parallels are just too many.

The style of the story is focused on an agriculture society on what

may be a collectivized farm (China's usual mindset, and especially that of Mao who swam in the sea of peasants), the Group of Seventeen is appealed to like the peasants appealed to distant mandarins and Party officials for justice*, the Group of Seventeen is even named like various Chinese entities - Gang of Four, anyone? -The use of numbers is again characteristically Chinese, if you don't believe me, look at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Chinese_numbered_policies or look at how many Chinese entries there are in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Numeric_epithets (This impression is particularly reinforced if you read any substantial amount of ancient Chinese literature/philosophy/history.) The quoting is a clever mockery of communist quoting and especially quoting from the Little Red Book (an approved text if ever there was one). The sentiments are in line with communist theory.

Hell, "correct thought" is literally a China term! Look through Google Books if you don't believe me, eg.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=ku5fABfvOGgC&pg=PA45&dq=%22correct+thought%22#v=onepage&q=%22correct%20thought%22&f=false>

So there are many many points in the story that reek of Chinese communism. And *not* of Islam or the Turks.

* Not just my observation; see

<http://crookedtimber.org/2009/03/07/loyal-to-the-group-of-seventeen/>

--

gwern

<http://www.gwern.net>

Great stuff Gwern.

My feelings about all this were subtext read from the gut, but this really validates the idea that they are a communist metaphor, influenced by Chinese communism, though not necessarily Asian at all.