

Sea monsters

The Urth list — 11 messages, 7 voices, 28 May 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6030>

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Andrew Mason — 28 May 2011, 20:33

There's an interesting passage in `_Urth_` which I think illuminates the recent discussion.

UOTNS 37: Severian talking to his followers in prison (the speech which was transcribed by Canog).

'... the ice in the south is already gathering new strength. To this ice of ten chiliads will be added the ice of the winter now almost upon us, and the two will embrace like brothers and begin their march upon these northern lands. Great Erebus, who has established his kingdom there, will soon be driven before them, with all his fierce, pale warriors. He will unite his strength with Abaia's, whose kingdom is in the warm waters. With others, less in might but equal in cunning, they will offer allegiance to the rulers of the lands belong Urth's waist, which you call Ascia; and once united with them will devour them entirely.'

Several things here: .

a. There are two big monsters and an indeterminate number of little monsters - perhaps as many as fifteen, though we can't know that. b. It explains what Erebus is doing so far north, though his base was in the south. c. It explains how they came to dominate the Ascians - by originally offering themselves as servants. d. It shows that the monsters were already established on Urth in Typhon's time - which fits `_Short Sun_`, but does not seem to fit, on a natural reading, Typhon's words in SOTL. Come to think of it, this might be relevant to the question of a changing chronology.

Gerry Quinn — 28 May 2011, 20:48 · in reply to Andrew Mason

From: "Andrew Mason" <andrew.mason53 at googlemail.com>
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I don't think it really contradicts Typhon's words, not strongly anyway. He says something like "there are powers in the sea, that would rule", but he might simply not have bothered to mention "they were no more than pests in my time".

Perhaps Typhon tolerated the undersea rulers so long as they kept to their watery domain.

- Gerry Quinn

Daniel Petersen — 28 May 2011, 23:14 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On a minor note here, does anyone else find these big beasts a bit Lovecraftian, Cthulhu-esque? I feel Wolfe is engaging with that kind of cosmic horror in the background of the whole BotNS (in fact, I'm sad to find it pretty much missing in the rest of the Solar Cycle - but perhaps the vampiric Inhumani make up for that).

-DOJP

On Sat, May 28, 2011 at 9:48 PM, Gerry Quinn <gerryq at indigo.ie> wrote:

From: "Andrew Mason" <andrew.mason53 at gmail.com>

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David Stockhoff — 28 May 2011, 23:18 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

Totally!

On 5/28/2011 7:14 PM, Daniel Petersen wrote:

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Daniel Petersen — 28 May 2011, 23:22 · in reply to David Stockhoff

Cool. Glad I'm not the only one. Any one know of chat about that on the list?

-DOJP

On Sun, May 29, 2011 at 12:18 AM, David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:
Totally!

On 5/28/2011 7:14 PM, Daniel Petersen wrote:

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avast! Antivirus: Outbound message clean.
Virus Database (VPS): 110528-1, 05/28/2011
Tested on: 5/28/2011 7:18:51 PM
avast! - copyright (c) 1988-2011 AVAST Software.
<http://www.avast.com>

Jerry Friedman — 29 May 2011, 04:34 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

From: Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com>

On a minor note here, does anyone else find these big beasts a bit Lovecraftian, Cthulhu-esque?

Definitely, including the fact that they rule Ascia, reminiscent of the way Cthulhu et al. are worshiped by various humans and humanoids. I mentioned that a couple of times recently.

I feel Wolfe is engaging with that kind of cosmic horror in the background of the whole BotNS

...

I don't see that, though. If you believe in God as Wolfe and Severian do, you don't have to worry much about cosmic horror, just about alien monsters and things like that. Though there might be some of Pascal's and Lovecraft's horror of the gulfs of space--the Empirical Bogey, I think C. S. Lewis called it--in the scene where Severian sleeps under the stars in the mountains (SotL, Chapter XIII).

Jerry Friedman

Daniel Petersen — 29 May 2011, 12:33 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

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<jerry_friedman at yahoo.com> wrote: I don't see that, though. If you believe in God as Wolfe and Severian do, you don't have to worry much about cosmic horror, just about alien monsters and things like that. Though there might be some of Pascal's and Lovecraft's horror of the gulfs of space--the Empirical Bogey, I think C. S. Lewis called it--in the scene where Severian sleeps under the stars in the mountains (SotL, Chapter XIII).

Well, yeah, I guess if you mean 'you don't have worry about it' in the sense that if Christian theology is true, then 'theocomedy' (as the theologian Thomas Oden calls it) trumps cosmic horror in the end. But that doesn't mean you don't have to engage the *worldview* that all is horror and chaos at the centre and in the end. Which is what I think Wolfe is engaging with throughout much of his fiction. We're frail and finite beings and we have to engage one another's 'ultimate commitments' in our art or it lacks plausibility and persuasion and cohesion. Anyone who wants to embrace cosmic horror has to engage its possible opposite to be believable. And vice versa: if Wolfe ultimately exhibits theocomedy in his art (as I think he does as a whole), then he must engage its potential opposite(s) as represented in things like Lovecraftian cosmic horror. I think he does this very well and interestingly in fact. (As does Lewis in various places, e.g. Perelandra.)

-DOJP

Lee Berman — 29 May 2011, 23:13 · follows Daniel Petersen

Andrew Mason: "...Great Erebus, who has established his kingdom there, will soon be driven before them, with all his fierce, pale warriors. He will unite his strength with Abaia's, whose kingdom is in the warm waters..."

Thanks Andrew. I've always thought that was a key passage. I find it graphically illustrated by Maxellindis' uncle's story about the ship on Gyll with voices coming from the water and the bottom roiled carrying giant pandours which seem to be a good semblance of "cold, pale warriors". In other words, the scene describes a partnership between Abaia and Erebus. That's why I recently asked James about his contention that Erebus is long dead. Personally, I suspect Wolfe intends these creatures, like their mythological analogs, to be essentially immortal. Like all (false?) gods, their power and survival depend the number (and fervency) of their followers.

Daniel Peterson: I feel Wolfe is engaging with that kind of cosmic horror in the background of the whole BotNS (in fact, I'm sad to find it pretty much missing in the rest of the Solar Cycle - but perhaps the vampiric Inhumis make up for that).

I tend to disagree. Not that the Inhumis aren't a horror element. But I think the gods of the Whorl add an electronic ghostian version of the sea monsters in Long Sun (while the giant fish in Scylla's lake is closer to a real version of them).

But most especially in Short Sun, I find that trilogy bookended by a depiction of The Mother (partly via Seawrack) in OBW and Great Scylla in RttW which are much more graphic views than anything we get in BotNS (except for giant Tzadkiel's pinching off a small version of herself). I think The Mother and Great Scylla highly qualify as Lovecraftian leviathan monstrosities and I find their presence to have a behind-the-scenes impact on the story at least as great as Abaia and Erebus in BotNS.

Daniel Petersen — 30 May 2011, 12:41 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

I think The Mother and Great Scylla highly qualify as Lovecraftian leviathan monstrosities and I find their presence to have a behind-the-scenes impact on the story at least as great as Abaia and Erebus in BotNS.

Point happily taken.

-DOJP

On Mon, May 30, 2011 at 12:13 AM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

Andrew Mason: "...Great Erebus, who has established his kingdom there, will soon be driven before them, with all his fierce, pale warriors. He will unite his strength with Abaia's, whose kingdom is in the warm waters..."

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James Wynn — 30 May 2011, 20:11 · in reply to Lee Berman

Andrew Mason:

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Thanks Andrew. Certainly a) and c) are in line with my understanding til now. I disagree that it contradicts what Typhon says. It only provides more information.

Lee Berman:

That's why I recently asked James about his contention that Erebus is long dead. Personally, I suspect Wolfe intends these creatures, like their mythological analogs, to be essentially immortal. Like all (false?) gods, their power and survival depend the number (and fervency) of their followers.

From Calde of the Long Sun:

[Silk says,] "The gods are immortal, ageless. It's their immortality that makes them gods, really, more than anything else." [...] [Quetzal replies,] "Echidna told you Pas is dead, and you can't help believing her. I've known it for thirty years, since shortly after his death, in fact. How did he die? How could he? [...] When I was made Prolocutor, Patera Calde, we had a vase at the Palace that had been thrown on the Short Sun Whorl, a beautiful thing. They told me it was five hundred years old. Almost inconceivable. Do you agree? And priceless, I would say, Your Cognizance. Lemur wanted to frighten me, to show me how ruthless he could be. I already knew, but he didn't know I did. I think he thought that if I did I'd never dare oppose him. He took that vase from its stand and smashed it at my feet. [...] Look, now. That vase was immortal. It didn't age. It was proof against disease. But it could be destroyed, as it was. So could Pas. He couldn't age, or even fall sick. But he could be destroyed, and he was."

And for a being like Pas, death was not necessarily the end.

Lee:

But most especially in Short Sun, I find that trilogy bookended by a depictions of The Mother (partly via Seawrack) in in OBW and Great Scylla in RttW which are much more graphic views than anything we get in BotNS (except for giant Tzadkiel's pinching off a small version of herself). I think The Mother and Great Scylla highly qualify as Lovecraftian leviathan monstrosities and I find their presence to have a behind-the-scenes impact on the story at least as great as Abaia and Erebus in BotNS.

The Rajan calls Scylla and Mother "sisters", but I suspect they are in someway the same. If Wolfe thinks he was provided enough clues to know one way or the other, then I missed it. Yet, her ability to absorb Cilinia implies to me that Scylla is not merely a biological creature. Or if she is, then she of some biology that is similar but greater than the Neighbors.

J.

Lee Berman — 31 May 2011, 03:25 · follows James Wynn

James Wynn:

[Silk says,] "The gods are immortal, ageless. It's their immortality that makes them gods, really, more than anything else."

[...]

[Quetzal replies,]

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And for a being like Pas, death was not necessarily the end.

Thanks, James, for these Silk and Quetzal quotes. They do support my view of the immortality of Sun Series gods- they can be eliminated or destroyed in some manner but they always have the potential to come back.

I consider the converse of Silk's statement to be equally important: it is our mortality which makes us human. This is an important concept in The Bible (we get the fruit of knowledge, not life), most mythologies, even in Tolkein. Mortality is both our curse and blessing. Our weakness is ultimately our greatest strength (let's face it, the gods and elves just can't breed as rapidly as we can, and such reproductive power requires mortality).

I think these concepts support my (minority?) opinion that Typhon should be considered more as god than human. There is name, his psychic power and his Pas status on the whorl. But mostly there is his immortality. The guy wasn't just parched, he was a piece of leather. But somehow from that he rather quickly became a working organism again. Severian couldn't do that for human Little Severian.

Severian's apparent immortality calls his humanity into question for me also. He thinks he is mortal. We think he is mortal. But is he really? Nothing can kill the guy though many powerful beings have tried.

The Rajan calls Scylla and Mother "sisters", but I suspect they are in someway the same. If Wolfe thinks he was provided enough clues to know one way or the other, then I missed it. Yet, her ability to absorb Cilinia implies to me that Scylla is not merely a biological creature. Or if she is, then she of some biology that is similar but greater than the Neighbors.

For me, this question has been adequately answered in other discussions. We are dealing with creatures with the capacity for asexual reproduction but, since they can take human form, our narrators insist on trying to assign human kinship labels to these things. Small wonder they are inadequate.

What is the proper word to describe the relationship between BIG Tzadkiel, human-sized Tzadkiel and tinker-bell Tzadkiel? Perhaps as you say, James, "sisters but in some way the same."

Thus, I think, the snake associations with both Echidna and Scylla. The MOther is on Blue Great Scylla is on Urth. Scylla may, in a sense, be Echidna's daughter but they are in some ways the same (cloned?) being.

Wolfe deliberately plants evidence to make us think Pas and his family are based entirely on a human family. But I see more evidence, including their immortality in the sense previously discussed, and those darn sea monsters, that there is more to them than simply a legendary human king and his nasty royal brood. I think Wolfe interview quotes about the realness of mythological gods supports that conclusion.