

VRT=???

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 20 May 1998

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Robert Borski — 20 May 1998, 14:19

Fellow Readers:

For years I've always believed "V.R.T." to be one of GW's more enigmatic titles, in that no matter how many times I read the text I could never quite figure out what all three initials stood for.

By paying close attention we do learn that V stands for Victor. This is disclosed by RT, VRT's scurrilous father (p.180, Scribners), who, along with his son, scam various people by claiming to be descendents of the original populace of Sainte Anne, the Free People/abos. (RT appears to be entirely human, but VRT is only half so.)

Ten pages later, Dr. Marsh (who will be killed and then impersonated by VRT) reveals the T stands for Trenchard, again more as a casual aside than anything else, but obviously how the father-and-son tandem are known to the community of Frenchman's Landing. RT himself also has an alternate Annese name, Twelvewalker.

This then yields the name Victor Trenchard. But what about that damn R? I always assumed it stood for the same name in father and son and for a while thought all three initials were meant to suggest the word ViRTual--as in Victor Trenchard is the virtual (as opposed to actual) twin of Dr. Marsh. Still, it doesn't fully satisfy.

mantis's recent quip about it possibly being Rodman is actually quite sound and was my own first best guess for a long time. After all, we know from certain textual evidence that Number Five's true name is Gene Wolfe, so Rodman--GW's middle name--certainly seems apposite and does expand on the novel's thematic core. Unfortunately, I could never find any textual evidence to support this.

In fact, as in much of Wolfe, most of the clues are elusive. But they are there.

On the second page of the novella, for example, we see a junior officer examining what he thinks is the case file of Dr. Marsh, who has been imprisoned both as possible spy and murderer of Maitre (Marsh himself is actually dead at this point; VRT is the prisoner in question). He finds a school composition book initialed VRT, inside the back cover of which is revealed the following information: "Rm E2S14 Seat 18." _Directly_ underneath this, we read: "name." Obviously, the alphanumeric involved do not signal a name (at least none that I've been able to readily decode), but seem to refer to a classroom and seating arrangement. I do, however, want you to notice the presence of the R, the E, and the 2.

Later, on p.178, Dr. Marsh details his first meeting with RT, informing us that contrary to the old man's alleged Annese heritage, "In my opinion his actual descent is Irish." Marsh then notes the color of RT's hair, which is red--a reference that is made several more times in the text.

For some reason probably having more to do with luck than intuition, several days ago I was browsing through CASTLE OF THE OTTER, when I came across Gene Wolfe's biographical details.

Lo and behold, what do I learn but that both GW's father and firstborn son are named Roy Emerson (a practice I happily refer to as nomenclatural cloning). 2 RE's!

This sent me scurrying to the dictionary. "Roy," I learn with frisson, is "*_Gaelic for red_*" (Italics mine)

Can there now be any doubt that VRT is named after both Gene Wolfe's father and son and stands for Victor Roy Trenchard?

Lest anyone think this is truly cockeyed (not all of my FIFTH HEAD ramblings have been entirely well received), I offer the following as one additional item of support:

In prison VRT describes how he and his family lived within the vicinity of St. Madeleine, a church.

Madeleine--besides the obvious reference to Proust--is the name of Gene Wolfe's firstborn daughter.

Robert Borski

Tony Ellis — 21 May 1998, 08:39 · follows Robert Borski

21/05/98

08:54

RE>VRT=3D???

Robert Borski:

R =3D Roy

Ingenious! My only reservation is that, as you say, "Rm E2S14 Seat 18" clearly refers to a classroom and the seat in that classroom where young Victor sat, which makes me a little reluctant to give R and E any other significance.

My only alternative suggestion, mind you, is Roncevaux, which as I recall is the town where Victor and his family live. Dodgy.

I find myself wondering *_why_* Victor gave "room E2S14, seat 18" as his name. A childish mistake? Or, as an Annese boy in an alien culture, did VRT feel that that was as much his name as "Victor"? This is, after all, a story about identity and colonialism (amongst other things).

As for the significance of Trenchard... a trencher is, of course, a wooden or ceramic platter, and significantly the word comes from the French trenchoir. Would that make a trenchard some sort of serving man, a medieval plate-carrier? Just a thought.

William H. Ansley — 16 Jun 1998, 11:51 · follows Tony Ellis

Can there now be any doubt that VRT is named after both Gene Wolfe's father and son and stands for Victor Roy Trenchard?

Yes, I have a doubt. But I am willing to accept Roy as being the best suggestion I have seen, although I have a sneaking suspicion that 'R' stands for "Rm E2S14 Seat 18".

To paraphrase Corbin Dallas in _The Fifth Head of Cerberus_ ... oops, I mean _The Fifth Element_: "All of that is your middle name?"

Maybe they called him Room for short.

But seriously folks, if Rm E2S14 is a room number, isn't it pretty weird? It seems as if the rooms are arranged in a huge grid ("Now you go two rooms east and 14 rooms south. You can't miss it.")

Or is this some common French room-numbering scheme that this ignorant (American) eclectic has never heard of?

William Ansley