

The Shrike and Dante

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 30 May 1998

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Robert Borski — 30 May 1998, 18:14

One of the scenes I've puzzled over most in FIFTH HEAD I call the Shrike Engima and it begins the final novella of the book, VRT.

In it the officer assigned to review Marsh's case record picks up VRT's school composition book and reads the following, as Victor, in describing two birds, writes : "One was a skull-shrike, and the other was a bird that the shrike had..." The ellipsis ends the sentence, but I feel the next word would be impaled if finished. The shrike impales its prey on thorns (Roncevaux is French for thorn) and moreover has a reputation for bloodthirstiness, often killing more than it can eat. At first I thought this scene symbolically recapitulated the death of Maitre by Number Five, who kills--impales--his father with a scalpel, but later, when the junior officer assigned to review Marsch/VRT's case reads of Marsch's being scratched by thorns after an encounter with the tire-tiger, he interrupts his reading and goes back and specifically rereads the two sentences about the shrike. I therefore have always believed the shrike scene had additional significance. But what?

Then recently in a communique from Professor Andre-Driussi, Chair of Literature at the Universite d'Urth, I was startled to read his conjecture, in responding to the murderous/suicidal impulses of the Wolfe clan, about how maybe FIFTH HEAD was "a descent in the Inferno, from the woods of the suicides to the realm of the patricides."

This immediately kicked free all sorts of associations, from Number Five as Dante, Phaedrea as Beatrice and Mr. Million as Virgil (another V--and there is a Virgil quote in FH that David recites).

But more importantly "woods of the suicides" reminded me that some of the suicides in INFERNO's seventh circle--Piero Delle Vigne, the advisor to the Emporer Frederick, e.g.--were imprisoned in a thorn bush. Once again I thought of the Wolfe clan, and specifically the very first member of the clan, who opted for suicide in allowing his brain to be scanned into Mr. Million. Cool, I thought. There's also the quasi-suicides of the second and third Maitres, who are killed by clonal versions of themselves

But then I went back to VRT and picked up the narrative, with the junior officer coming back to Marsch's journal, which he has put down, no doubt having free associated Marsch's mention of thorns with Roncevaux (again, French for thorns).

In the very next extract he reads Dr. Marsch is bitten by VRT's abo catgirl. i.e., he's metaphorically "impaled," completing the second sentence in Victor's school composition book.

The very next entry in the journal, however, dated one day later, is clearly Victor's.

"Hand still bad, as you can see from the writing. Without the boy I don't know what I'll do. He has done everything, most of the work, for the entire trip." (p. 234)

Marsch, in other words, has been killed by Victor (Marsch=bird impaled by shrike), and VRT, to complete the Dantean thorn connection, has committed metaphorical suicide, abandoning his previous identity and taking on that of Marsch--all this adumbrated, hologram-style, at the beginning of VRT in what is not even two complete sentences. Zowie! No wonder I'm a Wolfe aficionado.

Robert Borski