

Labor 12: the Hound of Hades

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 01 Jun 1998

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Robert Borski — 01 Jun 1998, 23:13

Nice to finally see some more discussion on FIFTH HEAD. For a while there I thought I was going to have to do a reverse-Herakles and drag you all back down, kicking and screaming, into the cave with me. As it is I hear barking in my sleep. Then again maybe that's Triskele, my chihuahua

Anyway, some post-12 Labored thoughts.

Re my earlier wondering, how, with one unified conquering force, two different forms of government arose on Sainte Anne and Sainte Croix, near the end of V.R.T. the officer assigned to decide Marsch's fate writes in his final disposition, "#143 may be an agent of junta currently in power on the sisterworld." That no one on Sainte Anne mentions the government in similar terms, I'm assuming whatever coup d'etat did take place occurred in the relatively distant past and is now accepted. *Junta* at any rate satisfies me.

Re mantis' supposition that the middle-aged fat man imprisoned near the end is our own beloved Maitre: yes, yes, yes! In a novel filled with Gene Wolfes, this seems almost de rigeur. And if Alfred Hitchcock can do it, why not GW0?

How does VRT kill Dr. Marsch? I'm not an advocate of the rifle theory. For starters Marsch states he's a horrible shot, closing his eyes before he shoots, and then firing. Even if he's doing this to avoid killing any fauna that may actually be shape-changed Free People--mantis' citing of the double-pupiled caribao thing is dead on, and also why Victor begins to cry at its death (though Marsch misconstrues this)--you are not going to acquire the skills you need to use firearms efficiently by shooting with your eyes closed. More likely he uses a weapon he's already comfortable with, and in fact, earlier before the expedition sets out Marsch rather confidently writes, "At least I won't have to worry about a mutiny among my subordinates unless a mule kicks me or the boy cuts my throat while I sleep!" The exclamation point seems extra significant--in fact, I think it's the only one Marsch uses in his journal (a Clute clue, no?). The real Dr. Marsch also has no beard, but the reason according to Victor abo adolescent males grow beards is to protect their throats from the teeth of attackers. Hence I favor the cut-throat theory.

Why does VRT kill the abo catgirl? Well, for starters, he's extremely psychosexually-disturbed, having not only a mother who was a prostitute, but he also initially thought she abandoned him because she saw him sexually trysting with a girl. In other words Sigmund Freud could have made him his life's work, and Tony Hopkins would have been the ideal actor to portray him. We also see further evidence of VRT's maladjustment in his consorting with whores at Roncevaux and the Maison du Chien. Likewise at Mde. Duclose's boarding house when he tells us Celestine Etienne does not appear to be masturbating with her candle tonight--later admitting he doesn't "even know this young lady." That he eventually becomes racked with guilt and/or disgust and/or Oedipal angst and kills the girl does not surprise me in the least.

Why does VRT kill Dr. Marsch? Many reasons suggest themselves. A confrontation over the catgirl or missing meat. Killing and assuming Marsch's identity allows Victor some measure of a blither future. But the reason I'd like to advance is sexually-charged. Dr. Marsch, I posit, is a homosexual. This is tenuous, I realize, but let's examine the evidence. Early, in his journal, he describes how Victor "is handsome in a rather sensitive way." Nowhere at all does he express his opinion about the looks of or desire for a female--something I find odd in a man of Marsch's hormonally-charged years (early 20s). He also appears to be somewhat disturbed by the notion that Victor might be engaged in some sort of amorous dalliance with Jane-of-the-abos, in fact even opining he might shoot them if he finds them laying together. But the clincher is he reports in his journal that he's noticed Victor is uncircumcised--where have your eyes been, Dr. Marsch, and how long did they linger there and why did you feel the compulsion to jot this down (pant, pant)? Given that Victor seems hypersexualized, might not we also expect similar feelings in his shadow-twin-secret-sharer-other? Plus Marsch's lack of a beard--a symbol of manliness--might also be another clue. I'm even willing to speculate that the missing pages in his journal (what I call the notebook mystery in my CAVE CANEM) might involve a homosexual tryst with someone at Roncevaux--after all, we have Victor's jailhouse memories about doing a prostitute there and since much of the book is reflective/refractive, it's hard not to see parallels. Marsch then removes the incriminating pages from his notebook--he must have the requisite sharp knife required (a detail mentioned by the junior case officer when he sees the missing pages), because he's been filleting his shot game all along--because knowing Victor's avidity for reading material he doesn't want the boy to accidentally access the data about his homosexual tendencies. Victor's uncut nature arouses him, however, but when he puts the move on horrified Victor, the latter in turn circumcises the doctor--right around the throat. He subsequently can never mention it either because he does not want the world to know Dr. Marsch is dead. He also does not dwell on the matter in prison because he himself hating women is tottering psychologically close to latent homosexuality, but is totally in denial. Laugh at this admittedly facile conceit, but also consider this one last bit of evidence: in prison Victor recalls a brass instrument he once bought because it fascinated him, "a thing of clamps and toothed jaws and cruel little hooks."

What is this instrument, you ask?

It's a combination retractor, clamp and surgical punch, and it's used for circumcisions.

Robert Borski (who still remembers his own Bris, I don't care if I was eight days old)