

Notes From Cliff

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Robert Borski — 06 Jun 1998, 17:09

From my ever growing CAVE CANEM, I now submit its tentative Forward, "Notes From Cliff: An Introductory Approach to THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS:"

Published in 1973, THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS was Gene Wolfe's second novel, and it is a pure delight from start to finish. Ostensibly, it appears to mine one of literature's oldest themes, the coming-of-age, rite-of-passage story, told in the form of three linked novellas and cast in the familiar tropes of science fiction--from interplanetary colonization to cloning to first contact with an alien race. Each of the novella's main characters--Number Five, John Sandwalker, V.R.T.--is under the age of twenty; each murders an authority figure, who collaterally represents acquired knowledge (a scientist father; the shaman Lastvoice; and Professor John Marsch, respectively). Gene Wolfe, in other words, has appropriated for himself a bit of archetypal terrain, one where he is both main cartographer and leader of the expedition. And it is a wonderful world he limns and extremely enjoyable, even on a very primary level, where's one goal is simply divertissement, to spend some time stoking up that ol' sense of wonder all good sf evokes, as well as perhaps meeting some interesting characters.

But for all its genre trappings FIFTH HEAD is all so very, very, very much more. And it has all the resonance and perspicacity of those works the world now deems classic literature. This same dual quality of Wolfe's fiction--works that are both (hush my oxymoronic breath) genre fiction and classic literature--underwrites as well the very underpinnings and thematic engine of FIFTH HEAD, in that the book is not so much one novel, but two, each of which is not only the other's shadow, but its reflection. For Ursula LeGuin, Gene Wolfe represents Mozart, but for me he is J.S. BACH, weaver of contrapuntal and fugual majesty.

Readers old to Wolfe are probably more than well aware of the author's naming stratagems. Quite simply put (for those of you who are new to the man), the names Gene Wolfe assigns to both his characters and settings are charged with extra significance. On one level they function as our own names do--(I'm deliberately going to avoid the more formal grammars here of linguistics and semiotics)--they identify us on a very surface, easily-accessible level. In Wolfe, however, all names have an additional associative or attributive value, and one of the great joys in reading him is trying to figure out their provenance or etymological origins. Because they do add to the richness and complexity of the novel, and often immeasurably so.

Let us consider two examples.

One of the planets in FIFTH HEAD is called Sainte Anne. And while one might think the name has been chosen because of Wolfe's ardent Catholicity--Sainte Anne is mother to Mary--also knowing that much of the novel's story takes place at a whorehouse located at 666 Saltimbanque St. (the novel's other main Biblical reference, 666 being the Number of the Beast, a numerical cognomen of the devil) allows us to look at the novel from a slightly different perspective, especially considering how Number Five, the narrator of the title novella, is as parthenogenetically conceived as Jesus Christ. Not knowing this, of course, does not preclude

you from enjoying the work, but look how much more resonance FIFTH HEAD has when you consider the additional information. Number Five as Anti-Christ; can the apocalypse be far behind? (I'd tell you--but that would be cheating.)

Another name that commends itself by example is that of Nerissa. In the book she is a prostitute/ maid at the Maison du Chien. Where does her name come from? Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, where Nerissa is the flirty handmaid to Portia. Given the existence of several similarly- derived names from literature--Phaedria and Marydol, each handmaids as well--we are able to draw upon their provenance and glean a little bit more about the world of Sainte Croix, where slavery is legal, and girls are bred for bondship, and sexual ones at that if they're attractive enough. Again, ignorant of these details, our enjoyment of the work is not so much diminished, just unaugmented. As if we could only hear one strain in the Wolfeian fugue, but no contrapuntal mode. Be that as it may, it still hums.

I'd also like to make the same case about the characters of FIFTH HEAD. Each, I contend, has this same binary component--in that, not only are they the people we **think** they are, they have an **additional significance,** what in terms borrowed from chemistry I call isotopes or valences, though sometimes the distinction between the two is arbitrary or blurred. Let us consider several examples. Number Five is the clone of Maitre--an isotope--but also has a valence: his real name, which can be worked out--is Gene Wolfe. Mr. Million, the robot tutor of David and Number Five, is a mechanical simulation of the very first clonemaster (isotope). The mother of VRT--whose name is Three Faces--has still another name, Eve (valence); Dr. Marsch is killed and then impersonated by V.R.T (isotope). These are but a few examples; for more see the Glossary entries. But also keep in mind that every single character in FIFTH HEAD has at least one isotope or valence, the same way the names do--or werewolves, for that matter.

This same binary nature can be still further extended to the events which take place in FIFTH HEAD. Yes, each does in and of itself advance the novel to a certain degree, nudging it along the narrative timeframe, and can be read simply as that, but like the names and isotopes/valences they can also be read on a completely different level. In fact, this is probably where Wolfe is at his diabolical best, because in essence he is trying to trick us, except like most magicians, who use smoke and mist to disguise their chicanery, Wolfe employs sunlight and the seemingly clear cut path. The title of one of Gene's short stories, "A Solar Labyrinth," perhaps best exemplifies this, and the notion of Wolfe-as-Daedalus is sweetly apposite. But I still would be remiss if I did not caution you, because despite its bright path and clearly designated exit ramps you **will** encounter the minotaur and yet--such is the craft of Wolfe--you may not even recognize you have met the beast at the heart of the maze--he'll have you convinced it's merely Elsie the Cow. This is why many people are so perplexed by Wolfe, while still others insist that what **seems** to happen in his books is exclusively and entirely that--simple straightforward events, narrated truthfully, and entirely supportable with citings from text. Wolfe is that much a magician, dazzling you with his sophisticated patter; but like all magic tricks there is a perceived reality and an actual order. And while it's often fun to enjoy magic for simply what it aspires to be, please be aware it's also just an artful form of showmanship based on illusion, no matter how genuine it appears.

Lastly, before I let you go, I would like to discuss the notion of Chekov's Gun as it applies to Gene Wolfe's work. Chekhov's Gun simply stated says "If you introduce a gun in Act I, you damn well better use it by the end of Act III." In other words, don't introduce or mention something that has no relevance to the rest of your fictional milieu, because this is chaff. I firmly believe Gene Wolfe is a proponent of this practice, being extremely tidy, perhaps even to the point of fastidiousness, although sometimes it's hard for us to hear the gun off, because his work (to mix a metaphor) is more *trompe l'oeil* than paint-by-number. Thus the mysterious lady in pink Number Five mentions in the title novella must reappear somewhere before novel's end, as

must his conjectural sister. For Wolfe to mention them and not bring them back would be a violation of Chekhov's Gun, and while he may be a sly and Byzantinely deceptive writer I do not think he is a dishonest one. My attempting to hear the gunshots and identify where they came from, as well as trace out as many of the novel's secret penumbrae as possible, is largely how CAVE CANEM came about; I wanted answers and additional gloss on the various aspects mentioned above and thereby deepen my own understanding of this most complex work..

Lastly then, this valedictory.

Once upon a time, a not-so-young man read a book called THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS by Gene Wolfe, enjoying it immensively, even if on a strictly primary level, before he even understood the concepts of subtext and echopraxis. Then along came a book called STROKES by John Clute, where he learned FIFTH HEAD had a somewhat more sophisticated structure and that it was even possible to deduce Number Five's real name, followed still later by Michael Andre-Driussi's LEXICON URTHUS, with its rich amplification on the baroque words and themes of the New Sun Universe. The now somewhat older man was so entranced that he decided to do his own exploratory of Gene Wolfe, hoping to add something of value to the appreciation and understanding of this master writer.

You are now reading that attempt.

Enjoy it for what you will. And please *do* reread FIFTH HEAD in conjunction with it, perhaps keeping in mind some of the notions I mention above, even if you disagree with some of my later conclusions.

FIFTH HEAD's grand central theme, of course, concerns identity.

Perhaps not uncoincidentally it's where I found myself.

I hope you might be that lucky, too.

Robert Borski