

The Shadow of Aubrey Veil

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 09 Jun 1998

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Robert Borski — 09 Jun 1998, 00:13

Prologue: those of you who have not read my post entitled NOTES FROM CLIFF might consider doing so now because it lays the groundwork as to how I approach FIFTH HEAD on an interpretive level. It's extremely germane.

I call my analysis the Secret Shadow approach because I believe that while the novel's grand theme involves the search for identity, its central conceit is that no one is simply who he or she seems.

Its antithesis, on the other hand, and with all apologies to Sigmund Freud, I call the Modified Cigar approach: i.e., "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, even when it explodes."

Lupines eager to critique what follows as anything other than it is--a postulate of my own critical manifesto--please be advised I do not smoke, although I have been known to explode.

In all of Gene Wolfe's FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS, my favorite character has always been Aunt Jeannine. This is because many, many mysteries obtain to her that Gene Wolfe never seems to address anywhere. What are we to make, for example, of her crippled nature? How did it result--either congenitally or through misfortune? Why hasn't she had her legs--which are described as being withered--fixed? After all, we know from events in V.R.T. that cryobanks carrying replacement limbs exist. We also know that Maitre has the capabilities to transplant supernumerary limbs--witness the four-armed slave seen in the warehouse caper. And yet Jeannine remains crippled.

There also seems to be some question as to how old she is. She's described as being a little gray-haired old lady, whereas Maitre seems more vigorously middle-aged. Is she older? And how does she die by the end of the novel? Apart from her invalidness she seems otherwise healthy.

Still another aspect I always found puzzling is her desire for money. Why would she need it when all her material needs are being taken care of? Despite what is later revealed to be financial difficulties, surely, from the descriptions we are given of the Maison du Chien with its fountains and rooftop gardens, the whorehouse is no dump. Why then this need for additional funds? A gold-plated wheelchair? What would she do with the money? Retire to the Florida equivalent of Port-Mimizon? And does the quarrel that is mentioned as being responsible for Jeannine and Maitre no longer speaking to one another and having separate quarters result from greed?

Another thing I found curious is that she also attends the first play Number Five and his cronies put on--why does Wolfe have her do this, since her presence at the play adds nothing in the way of plot advancement? Yes, it allows us to glimpse her withered legs pre-departure, but this could just as easily be conveyed by having Number Five notice them as she levitates up the spiral stairwell?

Then there is her scientific persona of Aubrey Veil, the originator of Veil's Hypothesis. Whatever would possess the madam of a whorehouse to undertake the study of aboriginal aliens on a completely different world? What leads her to formulate her intriguing hypothesis--that the abos of Sainte Anne have killed and replaced the humans? What is the significance of 'Aubrey Veil'? Remember how important decoding names is to a complete understanding of Wolfe; surely she has been given the pseudonym for some potent reason.

Lastly then, we have an additional mystery to consider and here I need to quote it direct. Victor, cast in the prison darkness of the citadel, is reminiscing about his get-togethers with Jeannine. Notice exactly how he states it:

She possessed real intelligence as well as a fascinating mind, and we had a number of long talks--often with one or more of her "girls," as she called them, for audience. (p.230)

Apart from the slightly ludicrous notion of a bunch of vaginas-for-hire sitting around listening to two scholars chew the anthropological fat, the sentence is preposterously redundant. No editor worth his or her salt would

ever let a writer use both quote marks and the appending 'as she called them.' In fact, there is no need to use either. Cross out the quote marks, the 'as she called them' and maybe add a "present" and the sentence still reads absolutely the same. Remember the old saw from Creative Writing 101--"Never say things twice or be redundant"? Well, this is Wolfe saying it three times and it's a clue--one of his patent tricks that he uses frequently, and over and over again <malicious grin inserted here>--i.e., that the tea-and-Leakey get-togethers discussed above are anything but what they appear to be.

In fact, as we all know, Gene Wolfe is an extremely sly and tricky writer. Witness, for example, how we're able to glean Number Five's true name--Gene Wolfe. Witness the delicious irony as well that VRT's long sought-after mother turns up unbeknownst right next to him in prison. My Secret Shadow approach maintains that 5HofC is *filled* with these sly, ironic gems, whereas to assume as others have that these are the only two such examples of mischief in the entire book severely underestimates Wolfe's gift for deviltry.

In light of the above paragraph and to continue with what has been a long series of similar suppositions I would like to make the following proposal: wouldn't it be exquisitely apposite if Jeannine Wolfe herself validated Veil's Hypothesis? But then, yes--wouldn't this mean that Jeannine's an abo?

Absolutely. But how can this be?

Let us consider the evidence, especially in regards to some of the earlier questions I posed above. Whenever possible I will try to mention parallel examples of what I'm proposing. This is another artistic conceit of Wolfe's, using what appears to be simple color or interesting detail for echopraxic effect (as mantis has demonstrated several times over, the book fairly roars with echos, faint though they may appear on initial observation).

The scene I think which best exemplifies this is the play scene I mentioned above. Remember that the wheelchair-bound Jeannine sits in the audience. On stage is Phaedria, who will play "the crippled daughter of the French governor," with David playing her lover. *Crippled* here has two valences, one of which I'll present now, the other later. Who is the only other crippled person present? Aunt Jeannine. Surely, we are meant to draw the parallel. (Notice too how both Phaedria and Jeannine share the same lust for money--it's Phaedria who later suggests David

and his friends pickpocket the play's attendees). Also note somewhat later this seeming bit of color: in the middle of the play the sisterworld of Sainte Anne rises in the sky and casts its green light upon the play. Given the earlier parallel I suggested, I maintain this is meant to suggest the following: Jeannine at one time was romantically involved with someone of political stature on Sainte Anne.

Aha, you say, even if true so what? How does this mean she's an abo? How does it tie into anything else?

Well, here go the first of many bold suppositions. If you find them ponderously difficult to accept, so be it. Sit back, relax and smoke a cigar, while I attempt to blow my own torus of interlinked smoke rings and weave my tale fantastic.

I submit to you that the person we known as Aunt Jeannine is much, much, much older than we all believe. In fact, she is the baby in the picture she shows Number Five of his "true" parents--i.e., the original Gene Wolfe and his wife, who emigrated to Sainte Croix and built the Maison du Chien. Notice how when he sees the picture Number Five assumes the child is a male, but has difficulty seeing the face because it's nearly smothered by *white* wool blankets. This is standard Wolfe misdirection. Compare as well the account of Mrs. Blount, who is born just before the penal colony ship Nine-Eight-Six takes off; I believe this is the echopraxic parallel, and one of several ways Mrs. Blount's account reprises that of Jeannine's.

So let's assume the baby in photo is Jeannine. She grows to become an attractive young woman on Sainte Croix. But remember Maitre's chagrin about how the Wolfe clan has never risen up to leadership positions on the planet? What better way to get your political foot into the door than marrying your daughter off to the son of the French governor of Sainte Anne? This is a time-honored conceit--marrying into politics--and has been around since the days of Hellas and Rome (remember Sejanus' proposed marital link in I, Claudius?) And I do believe that Sainte Anne rising over the play featuring Phaedria/Jeannine as the governor's "daughter-[in-law]" allows us to suppose this.

How this comes about is entirely speculative. Gene Wolfe 1 apparently has some money if he can pay his and the Mrs.' way 20 light years across space, then establish the Maison du Chien. Perhaps it's de rigeur to send your daughter off to finishing school on Sainte Anne the same way rich Americans send their daughters off to Paris (e.g., Jane Fonda and Candace Bergen, both of whom schooled in France). On Sainte Anne she meets the Governor's son or perhaps an arranged marriage has been made. At any rate Jeannine is married to the governor's son, who, if we are to accept the evidence of the play, where David is "a dashing captain of chasseurs," is in the military. Because he's away playing soldier, the bored Jeannine, who is the daughter of a scientist, is intrigued by certain notions about the native Annese, who in these days are still quite numerous. Again here I cite the account of Mrs. Blount, who mentions having abo children for playmates. Jeannine either invites one of these abo children to come live with her or has a summer home in the country, where the Governor can go a la Camp David for the American President to get away from politics and the heat of the city.

Unfortunately, it is not much longer after this point that the war breaks out.

Slight obligatory break to discuss history and Wolfe's naming conventions. On Sainte Anne there are two cities that have the same names as French cities here on Earth: Laon and St.-Dizier. Why does Gene Wolfe appropriate the names of these cities? Well, Laon for starters is the capital of Aisne Department, which is why I've made Laon capital of Sainte Anne. Stands to reason, doesn't it? An even more pertinent reason for Wolfe's picking Laon I'll reveal later. As

for St.-Dizier, Earth, it's regional headquarters for its area and hence the local repository for documents. Recall now that on Sainte Anne, during the war, St.-Dizier is "fused," and all the records are destroyed. Whether nuked or lasered, the fact that it has been chosen over Laon parallels World War Two, in that while Tokyo, the capital, was heavily bombed, it was Hiroshima, a regional headquarter, that was nuked. Also recall that Hiroshima had one of the larger Catholic presences in all of Japan--hence *Saint*-Dizier.

Meanwhile, back in Laon (the Annese equivalent of Tokyo), bombs destroy the Governor's Palace or Summer Villa, wherever Jeannine has been undertaking her Jane Goodall-like study of the Annese. (Dianne Fossey of "Gorilla in the Mist" offers another suggestive female parallel.)

Tragically, however, she's killed in the bombing, but one of her abo familiars lives, though her legs are horribly mangled.

Recall again the words of Mrs. Blount: "Yes, there was still quite a few French left here when we came, most all except the littlest children had their arms or their legs gone or was scarred terrible." Again, I believe this is meant as parallel; recall as well the earlier cited "crippled" reference in the play. Now it applies to another soon-to-become Jeannine.

This unknown abo girl--I have been unable to deduce her name--decides that she will impersonate the beautiful daughter-in-law of the Governor because it's a better life than eating swamp rats and snails in the back of beyond, where we're told half of all children die and foraging groups must be kept to subsistence levels. Here's where the Laon angle again is especially important. Remember how I told you it had additional significance? Well, Laon, France, is home to the secondmost important Catholic relic in all of Europe (the first is the Turin Shroud): a *copy* of the **Veil** of Veronica, which in itself purports to be a replica of Jesus's face. Note here that it is only a *copy*, however, as well as the *Veil* aspect (the original Veil is in St. Petersburg). Now we begin to see why Wolfe has chosen both Laon and Veil to use in FIFTH HEAD. The abo girl becomes a copy of the original, Veil-who-once-was-Jeannine.

The new Jeannine, like her brother in disguise, Victor Trenchard, is able to pull off the old switcheroo, and even to regenerate her lower extremities, but because of Dollo's Law is unable to produce functioning legs. That's why they're withered. (Also why as well Roy Trenchard can't use his hands post-train loss). And it's also why she can't get them fixed or a transplant. She's Annese, not human.

Meanwhile, after the fusing of St.-Dizier, the French sue for peace the same way the Japanese did after we vaporized Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But because life on Sainte Anne is now no picnic for the disenfranchised French, when Jeannine/abo is contacted by her father (or vice-versa) and presented with the chance to return to Sainte Croix, she avails herself of the opportunity.

Life begins anew for Jeannine back on Sainte Croix. Because she is an abo like Victor's mother or Cassilla she can affect how old she appears. She also now postulates the autobiographical Veil's Hypothesis. And remember how Victor generates his own Liev's Postpostulate? Liev and Veil in real life are mirror as well as anagrammatic images of each other.

Also note the fractious nature of the various Wolfe siblings. She and Maitre (who in reality is one generation younger) at one point argue so violently they no longer want anything to do with each other, and perhaps her name is even anathema to bring up in his presence. Recall also Number Five's description of Aunt Jeannine as the Black Queen in chess: "a chess queen neither

sinister nor beneficent, and Black only as distinguished from some White Queen I would never encounter." The White Queen Number Five never encounters, I submit, is the real Jeannine--remember the *white* wool blanket that smother's the baby's face in the picture? Given how Jeannine has no inkling that both Number Five and David exist, might we not suppose the same thing may have happened a generation earlier with Maitre--that he assumes she is merely an older sibling he's never heard about? (Remember, she can keep looking younger, or at least maintain a less ageful aspect.)

As for the money she desires I suspect she wishes to return to Sainte Anne and die among her own kind rather than spend the last of her days in a whorehouse (Maitre simply doesn't have it to give her). Unfortunately, this is exactly what happens, and I submit she dies of old age at the novella's end.

And the mysterious scene involving her, John Marsch and her "girls," as she calls them?

Let us recall the Shadow Children of "A Story." Not only are they able to generate eidola akin to New Sun aquastars--the Old Wise One is one such aquastar, and we also have mention by one of the marshmen that whenever you attack a group of Shadow Children there always appear to be more of them than there actually are--in fact, the Shadow Children have names that are based on how many in number their group comprises. But the numbers are only valid when the configuration is odd--1, 3, 5 or 7--suggesting that whenever the group is even numbered there are eidolic aquastars present.

Recall too that the Shadow Children are childlike in size. Now let us attempt to explicate Dr. Veil's first name: it's Aubrey, which means 'elf + ruler.' Elfin as in childlike, eh?

I submit to you Aubrey Veil is an abo of the Shadow Child variety. And her "girls, as she calls them" are aquastars, mind-generated eidola. Because remember the name of a single Shadow Child when its group is reduced to one? It's Wolf. Jeannine Wolfe, to be more precise.

(The parallel to this scene is the one in which Maitre explains to Dr. Marsch about the naked giantess walking through walls: she's an image too, a hologram.)

One last point I'd like to make in regards to the sensefulness of the above.

Readers of my CAVE CANEM may recall how I puzzled over what I thought was an editorial or auctorial miscue in "A Story" and "VRT." This is because in the former the abo constellation is called Shadow Child, but in the latter it's called Shadow Children, and features twice as many paired eyes (binary stars, probably). Also in "VRT," Dr. Marsh, despite having been shown its location earlier, is unable later to find the Shadow Children constellation.

He does however find it eventually, or rather his own shadow does.

She's Jeannine Wolfe of Sainte Croix, the abo proponent of Veil's Hypothesis.

Peter Stephenson — 09 Jun 1998, 07:53 · follows Robert Borski

"Robert Borski" wrote:

I call my analysis the Secret Shadow approach because I believe that while the novel's grand theme involves the search for identity, its central conceit is that no one is simply who he or she seems.

I would say this is a very Wolfean theme altogether, or to put it another way, torturers have shadows too. (Readers of this list may still dimly remember Wolfe wrote another series of novels under the title 'The Book of the New Sun'...) Severian hides in his cloak and behind his mask, Thecla for much of the time hides in Severian, Dorcas has been temporally shifted, Jolenta --- 'nuff said, Talos and Baldanders fit together differently from how it looks, the Autarch is in some sense his ancestors too, the alzado pretends to be little Severian's father... the list goes on and on. I think the difference is that in the Book it's only one of the great universal strands. On the other hand, is there any first rate novel which does not involve the search for identity? Wolfe's gift is in wrapping the inside and outside round one another, so you don't know any more quite what identity means.

pws