

Artifacts & Abos

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 14 Jun 1998

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m.driussi — 14 Jun 1998, 17:54

alga,

Well okay, so you don't like the "Aunt Jemima" <ouch> theory.

Still, beneath the grosser elements, the loops and twists I listed before, that presumably ninety-five percent of us can more-or-less agree upon, beyond that, I say, there are a lot of weird little details. Crippled legs is one.

The abo dexterity issue is nearly as cloudy as the shape-changing issue. Does V.R.T.'s "magical" rope ability prove he is abo, not abo, or half-abo? Does V.R.T.'s inability to start fire (he waits for Marsch to do it) or control fire (he always burns his fingers) prove he is abo or half-abo (because all "pure strain humans" like you and me can easily start fires using two plain sticks, right? <g>)? Is V.R.T.'s ability with the knife ("no danger unless he cuts my throat in the night" bit) an indication that he is human or half-human? (Such simple tool use might relate to Jeannine's use of a key--actually a key is probably even simpler.)

Earlier my own musings led me to look at the artifacts. They show up in "5HC" as plastic replicas, which seems to signal something--they are obvious "fakes" of artifacts. There is no question that the plastic models are fake, but there is an assumption that they represent real things. Plot-wise, they allow discussion of all things abo.

I don't recall any stone artifacts in "A Story." The killing tools are shell-creatures clinging to the stalks of water weeds. There are ropes, but the use of rope doesn't seem magical.

In "V.R.T." such a big deal is made about the artifacts being fabricated (somehow) by Roy, that I start to wonder. Sometimes when Wolfe has set up an A/B ambiguity, he then resolves it in the text as "A is the truth" when in fact just below the surface one can tell that this is misdirection (e.g., Severian is just being dense again) and if there is any resolution it is that "B is the truth."

For me, the way that Roy suddenly shifts and starts playing the Marsch line of reality in their confrontation seems to be more than just a con-man admitting to the "truth"; rather it is a con-man shifting his mode to match that of the "customer." It is also close to the largely non-verbal exchange between Dr. Talos and Jonas when they first meet. Jonas says, "You have understood me better than I wanted, as the man said when he looked in the mirror."

All these Wellerisms in the Urth Cycle have to be unpacked. In this case, the sense seems to be: "You sieur are a rogue and I'm no better (wink, wink)."

So. With this focus on artifacts being fakes (whether plastic or forged), with this sense of a con-man shifting from strategy one ("straight sell") to strategy two ("draw the mark into the `conspiracy`"), I began to wonder if the artifacts were somehow "real" (that is, in the face of clear "A is true" signals, I toyed with "B is true" possibilities).

I also was playing with V.R.T.'s "half-breed" status. How could this be "true" in a sense that was not the sense understood by the anthro informants?

A lot stems from how we define "race" in a given society or a given context; endogamy (with its shadow of incest), exogamy (with its shadow of bestiality). On Earth there is talk of "the white race" and "the black race"; wars have been fought by and for "the German race" and "the French race." And in 5HC, Roy the human is depicted as Irish hardware with French software dating from the population shifts of the Napoleonic Wars (another conflict involving French and English forces).

So I wondered if V.R.T. was a product of a mixed marriage, not between "human and abo" but between "hillwoman abo and wetlander abo"; that is, not so much "Caucasian man and dusky native girl" as "Englishman and French woman."

But how could this be, when Roy has such blue eyes and we have been led to believe that abos all have green eyes?

Well, I answered myself, the green eyes are from the high country.

It may be that the blue eyes are from the marsh. Or maybe the eyes reflect the worlds, and the blue eyes are abos from Sainte Croix (the blue world), nevermind for the moment how the abos got to Sainte Croix. That is: the abos who stayed on Sainte Anne maintain the old ways, the abos who went to Sainte Croix immitate (to a greater [shapeshifting] or lesser [cultural] degree) the French; the former abo twins (hill and marsh) are now alienated from one another (Annese and Croixese). The "mixed" marriage between Roy and his "French actress" (Brigit!!) wife fails; the English have made war upon the French; the Dreyfus case caused France to nearly war upon French Jews; the twin planets are in a state of war with each other.

And thus: green eyes = Annese; blue eyes = Croixese; brown eyes = Terran. (Suddenly it seems like the twin worlds are crawling with abos!)

Let me be the first to say that this has wandered far afield, from the text and from any topic at hand. And Roy as "assimilated abo from Sainte Croix" causes more cans of worms to be opened. But these are the things that Robert Borski and I were chatting about in e-mail as we tried to puzzle out the lurking mysteries of 5HC.

=mantis=