

Babbie and Horn: In A Pig's Eye

The Whorl list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 23 Aug 2000

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Robert Borski — 23 Aug 2000, 14:35

Ian Smith having previously written:

< "I found him in the forest, sitting in the dark under the trees. I could not see him, it was too dark to see anything. But I knelt beside him, and lay my head upon his knee, and he comforted me." (OBW p.378)>

<At first I thought this was another Neighbor encounter, but in IGJ Horn says he hasn't encountered them since they moved him to a new body. It could also be a particularly obtuse dream sequence, I suppose. Any ideas?>

To which Nick Gevers responded:

<When I read OBW, I was under the impression that the Horn / Babbie transference was a trick the Neighbors pulled to allow Horn to escape the inhumani; the latter have no interest in a hus, and would become confused. Of course, if the Neighbors are responsible, they are acting remotely, so Horn isn't really "encountering" them.>

My reading of the scene in question is somewhat different than everyone else's, I suspect, because I've always seen Babbie as more than a simple hus.

First off, he's the gift of Circean Mucor, which plays to the Homeric angle of transformed animals. ("Babbie's more like people," "Babbie's a person," etc., etc.)

Secondly, as Mucor says her goodbye to Horn from the cliff, there is this passage:

"At the top of the cliff, I saw a small dark figure that seemed almost a cluster of boys, or two men upon their hands and knees. It vanished, then reappeared as it made a flying leap from the top of the cliff. For the moment I thought its target was the sloop, and that it would strike it and die. It sent up a waterspout five cubits from the tip of the bowsprit, however, and vanished as if it had sunk like a stone." (OBW, 105)

On the very next page, however, Horn writes:

"I see that when I described my departure from Mucor's Rock, I never actually mentioned that Babbie came on board, his black snout and little red eyes breaking water just aft of the rudder, and his stubby forepaws clutching the gunwale beside me that reminded me unpleasantly of the leatherskin."

Almost certainly the "cluster of boys, or two men on their hands and knees" is a Neighbor. Given that "it" jumps into the water, and Babbie suddenly appears, I don't think it's unreasonable to conclude they're one and the same.

Thirdly, when Horn is lying in the pit, he records the following observation:

"I kept my eyes closed, knowing that it would be painful to look at the sun. It vanished, and I opened them to see what had become of it, and saw Babbie's familiar, hairy mask peering at me over the edge of the pit." (195)

I maintain that *mask* is the key word here. It's also possible that the "sharp faces" Horn sees while in the pit (note the plural) are a Neighbor's (the glittering eyes appear to belong to Krait). But almost certainly the following passage refers to a Neighbor, although it is recollected later:

"Once, as I lay there at the bottom of the pit, it seems to me that a man with a long nose (a tall man or an immense spider) stood over me. I did not move or even open my eyes, knowing that if I did he would be gone. He touched my forehead with something he held, and the pit vanished." (203)

The "long nose" attribute, I suspect, may be another clue linking Babbie with the Neighbor, and for what it's worth a very similar scene to the "He touched my forehead with something he held" occurs in GREEN, when Horn is anointed with sweet-smelling oil by a Neighbor.

Fourthly, and very close to the episode under discussion, Seawrack notes the following: "When [Babbie] goes into the trees, it will be a real person going in there. But he won't be a real person for long." (340)

Finally, we reach the scene in question. Horn writes:

"After a time that seemed long to me, three or four hours I would guess, when I was practically asleep too, I heard myself calling Babbie.

"Certain that I had been dreaming and had spoken aloud in a dream that I could no longer remember, I rubbed my eyes and rolled onto my hands and knees."

Shortly thereafter:

"Someone on shore called again for Babbie, and I understood that he meant me...He who called me seemed quite near, and he called me with more urgency than Seawrack ever has."

But how does Horn reach the conclusion that whoever's calling Babbie is actually calling for him? This seems more an element of dream logic than anything else, and if I had to bet the farm on anything, I'd wager it's a misapprehension; that either "Babbie" himself is calling out his name ("Babbie can talk") in order to lure Horn into the woods (perhaps to say goodbye), or that another Neighbor is calling Babbie. What seems to justify to most of you the interpretation that Horn has switched personalities with Babbie is the line about how Horn "knelt beside him and laid my head upon his knee, and he comforted me." But if Babbie really is a Neighbor, and has resumed his native form, couldn't this be a Neighbor's knee, given that we know the Vanished People are all extremely tall?

I'd also like to note what appears to be Horn's last word on the subject, which takes place during his stay with Brother and Sister. Writes he: "I asked them about the Vanished Gods. They said there was one in the forest, so I told them about him." Apparently at least he believes he's seen a Vanished God--perhaps indicative of some intermediate shape Babbie has taken, but one not recognizable to Horn as either Neighbor or Babbie.

On a related note I also continue to hold out that Babbie may reappear as Pig in the final Short Sun book. Babbie, as Mucor tells Incanto, has returned to her Rock, but given the enormous difficulty this must have encompassed, crossing leagues of ocean and land, I find it rather difficult to believe that a mere hus--even an extremely intelligent and resourceful one--could manage the journey. In other words, if the Neighbors can morph themselves along theric lines, why not human? Hence perhaps Babbie's return is actually from the Whorl.

I also find the following line from Blue intriguing: "Because I could not leave Pig blind, these people were able to bring me here, and so ended any chance of success I might have had." In adventures still to come, will Horn donate an eye to Pig and spend the rest of his life half-blind?

Robert Borski

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Kevin J. Maroney — 23 Aug 2000, 15:56 · follows Robert Borski

At 02:35 PM 8/23/00 -0500, Robert Borski wrote:

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I maintain that *mask* is the key word here.

You may be over-reading. Merriam-Webster gives this for "mask":

4 a : the head or face of an animal (as a fox or dog) b : an area (as the one around the eyes) of an animal's face that is distinguished by usually darker coloring

While it would certainly be like Wolfe to deliberately code meaning into that word, it's also a perfect example of Wolfe using precisely the right word where most authors would use an approximation.

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William Ansley — 23 Aug 2000, 23:44 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

At 2:35 PM -0500 8/23/00, Robert Borski wrote:

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Wow! I agree with you on this one Robert.

Way back on Tue, 19 Oct 1999, so long ago that I still felt clever for figuring out that Olivine was Hammerstone and Marble's daughter, I wrote this.

Horn gave his eye to Pig. And Marble's daughter gave up one of her eyes for her mother.

[Long passage citing textual evidence that Olivine is Hammerstone and Marble's daughter, and other stuff, snipped. Of course I eventually realized that the reason no one else had mentioned this idea before me was that everyone else had figured it out already and thought it was too obvious to mention.]

William Ansley

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William Ansley — 23 Aug 2000, 23:23 · follows William Ansley

At 2:35 PM -0500 8/23/00, Robert Borski wrote:

Secondly, as Mucor says her goodbye to Horn from the cliff, there is this passage:

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[...]

Almost certainly the "cluster of boys, or two men on their hands and knees" is a Neighbor. Given that "it" jumps into the water, and Babbie suddenly appears, I don't think it's unreasonable to conclude they're one and the same.

Almost certainly, it will surprise no long-time readers of this discussion list, least of all you Robert, that I disagree strongly with this interpretation. It is just so *unnecessary*!

It is *completely* certain to me that an eight-legged creature one-third(?) the height of a man will look more like a cluster of (shorter than a man) boys or two men on their hands and knees (short - because doubled over - and with eight leg-like - because of position - limbs) than a Neighbor, who is as tall as or taller than a man and has only four leg-like limbs (and, of course, four arm-like ones).

Perhaps the point Wolfe is trying to make here is that, even after being on Blue so many years, Horn (and, presumably, most over people born on the Whorl) still are not used to the fact that almost all the native wildlife has at least twice as many limbs as is "natural." (I am sticking with my belief that the leatherskin may have 12 legs, which I stated in a message months ago.)

William Ansley

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