

DOES IT MEAN? GENE WOLFE: PERVERSE PUZZLE MAKER

By

Marc A. Aramini

Bachelor of Science – Biochemistry
University of Notre Dame
2000

Master of Arts – English Literature
Northern Arizona University
2002

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College of Liberal Arts
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Marc A. Aramini

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Doctor of Philosophy – English
Department of English

Felicia Campbell, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Chair

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D.
Graduate College Dean

Vincent Perez, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Gary Totten, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Satish Bhatnagar, Ph.D.
Graduate College Faculty Representative

Abstract

The goal of this study is to re-examine the possibility of determining authorial intention, focusing on an author considered by many to be *sui generis*, science fiction grandmaster Gene Wolfe, well known for his confusing and difficult texts. Wolfe has a reputation as a “puzzle box” writer. Chapter One will trace some of the critical controversy surrounding his reception. Chapter Two will touch on a shift in recent twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism from poststructural and deconstructive tenets to a more authentic trust between author and reader, attempting to minimize the implications of the hermeneutic of suspicion without decreasing the richness of interpretation and reading. Figures such as Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida will be considered before turning to the critical discourse surrounding Wolfe, focusing in on the seminal early story “Trip, Trap” and his Soldier series, juxtaposing critic Nick Gevers’ overarching thesis, which champions Wolfe’s writing as subverting universals and suggesting a multiplicity of truths against my own reading of the text as the ultimate Christian syncretism, casting Wolfe as one of the most purely traditional writers and symbolists in the modern era. Chapter Three will focus on Wolfe’s use of archetypes and the collective unconscious, presenting a very difficult novel of Arthuriana in *Castlevew* against the palimpsest of his *Wizard Knight* series, highlighted by Wolfe’s direct use of Carl Jung and the critical perspective of Northrop Frye. Chapter Four will begin to approach some of Wolfe’s narrative tricks, including an assessment of an overarching theme in his work which is completely and utterly orthodox in nature: many, such as Peter Wright, read his *Urth of the New Sun* as a work espousing literary naturalism criticizing organized religion. Unfortunately, that work, along with its sequel, *The Book of the Short Sun*, are complex but clear examples of Augustinian or Thomist theodicy played out in narrative form, the furthest thing from Naturalistic principles imaginable. Chapter Five will look at

intertextuality in Wolfe's stories "The Changeling," "Seven American Nights," and in his novel *The Sorcerer's House*. All three of these stories have been used to champion the idea that Wolfe is intentionally poststructuralist in nature, inviting a variety of open interpretations and no definitive one. However, once the obscurity is pierced, much as in the case of some of Vladimir Nabokov's work, the possible readings begin to close off. The theoretical work of Bakhtin and Kristeva will be used to highlight some of this narrative intertextuality. Chapter Six will attempt to codify some productive methods of reading Wolfe, including emphasizing his allegorical use of local symbols to provide narrative closure. Cogent scenes from the novels *Peace*, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, and *The Book of the Short Sun* will illustrate this *mise en abyme* technique that, in Wolfe's hands, becomes allegorical and self-referential. Our conclusion will look very briefly at some other figures who might be considered to write puzzle box (or at least epistemologically puzzling) narratives such as Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, and William S. Burroughs, further elaborating why the specific techniques that work so well on the Apollonian Gene Wolfe might have variable success on other less structurally concerned Dionysian authors.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This study will focus primarily on the reception and analysis of the Science Fiction Grandmaster Gene Wolfe, in an attempt to pin down whether his allusive and sometimes confusing work is best considered to champion the traditional and objectively grounded pre-Modernist narratives it resembles on the surface so little or if it is best to contextualize his work in a truly post-structural light, emphasizing reception and relativity over intent, the innate instability of words over clear dictionary connotations, and the impossibility of certain knowledge in a world where science and engineering function based off of known, quantifiable properties. On a larger scale, we hope to reach some conclusions about reading, narratology, and authorial intent: does every author require a unique approach from readers?

Some very respected science fiction resources could be used to support Wolfe's identification as either a relativist who destabilizes universals or as a true Modernist, certain in his ability to communicate even beyond the letter of the text. In John Clute's most recent entry on Gene Wolfe in the monolithic *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, Wolfe is described at length as follows:

Though never the most popular nor the most influential author in the sf field, Wolfe remains quite possibly its most important, both for the intense literary achievement of his best work, and for the very considerable volume of work of the highest quality. From the first, and with a prolific output that has not significantly ebbed for more than five decades, he has created texts which – almost uniquely – marry Modernism and Genre SF, rather than fixing them into rhetorical opposition; his ultimate importance to Fantastika as a whole and to world literature in general derives from the success of that theoretically

precarious marriage. Though they never explicitly disassociate themselves from the devouring furnace of twentieth-century art (see Postmodernism and SF), they are not in fact propagandistic: his greatest texts are Modernist in a central understanding of the term: they are at one and the same time utterly present and implacably remote. There is no flirting with Equipose in his relationship to the SF Megatext, the urgencies of fantastika govern every word, but it seems clear that Wolfe Makes It New in what one might call a forbidding silence. Unfortunately the taxing problematics of style and structure that govern access to his core meanings, and his refus[al] to tag what he is doing, make his work very nearly opaque to the simplistic theme-criticism whose dominant position [in] sf academic work may only now be fading, giving some hope that younger critics will feel free to examine this elephant in the kitchen [...]. On the other hand, his use of thoroughly native sf patterns of tropes and storylines has inevitably ensured that any response to his work on the part of non-sf critics has been poverty-stricken. Furthermore, his relatively uneasy treatment of women has ensured cool treatment of his work on the part of Feminist critics.

Whether the current zeitgeist in academic circles, strongly concerned with sociological criticism and representation, will pass on before it embraces the work of Gene Wolfe, if it ever does, remains to be seen. Despite Clute's words, there is little practical hope that younger critics will pierce the shroud of such an ambiguously traditional figure as Gene Wolfe, as this study hopes to illustrate by employing an approach resembling "simplistic theme-criticism" and grounded in a binary and quite literal consideration of words and their meanings typical of structural linguistic conceptions. Nevertheless, Clute's assessment of Wolfe as a quintessentially Modernist writer is worth considering.

Other scholars have taken extremely divergent approaches to Wolfe, and much of the most recent writing has emphasized him as a figure of post-structural and postmodern relativity and indeterminacy. While his works seems ripe for academic attention, it has succeeded primarily in attracting a small but rabid fanbase; there are currently two podcasts devoted entirely to Gene Wolfe, *The Gene Wolfe Literary Podcast* and *Alzabo Soup*, which employ vastly different approaches to Wolfe's material. In response to a personal question from me about the nature of Wolfe's fictional construction in a 2018 AMA ["Ask Me Anything"], *Alzabo Soup* host Philip Armstrong notes:

I think the fundamental difference in our approaches that are in conflict (not that I think you and I are battling or anything, I just mean in terms of compatibility of how we approach the books) is that you start with an assumption that Wolfe wrote an answer to find, while we see the books as a neutral artifacts from which different conclusions can be gleaned, but that don't have a single "correct answer" that is objectively true.

This conflict means we don't always agree with each other's conclusions, but that doesn't mean they can't exist simultaneously. I'm delighted that Wolfe has written books that allow for both your symbolic approach and our character-focused one.

Here, Armstrong correctly identifies that I am invested in Wolfe's rigorous and logical, almost allegorical, use of symbols; he also reemphasizes the open nature that many see in Wolfe's work.

In some ways, Armstrong's attitude towards Wolfe's fiction would contextualize him as a quintessentially postmodern author. In agreement, juxtaposed against Clute's Modernist declaration, *The Palgrave History of Science Fiction* by Adam Roberts firmly identifies Wolfe as a postmodernist, and even condemns his readers for trying to "solve" his work. On a larger scale, Roberts' thesis in that work involves the idea that rational science fiction could not exist in a

world dominated by the mysticism of the Catholic church: only in the dialectic of the Protestant Reformation did SF's rigor and logic overtake the strong strains of romantic fantasy which characterized "genre" writing previously. No doubt the primary inspiration for Robert's approach originates in Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel* and its almost Hegelian teleological conceptualization of the Protestant Reformation, mercantilism, industry, and the possibility of class ascendance, bringing to life a new focus on the individual and producing a strong current of mimetic realism in literature. Entrenched in formal realism, Watt had the luxury of ignoring the romantic tradition alive in the rest of Europe, but as the natural descendants of romantic literature, from adventure stories and myths to gothic fiction, the complex genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy cannot be so easily separated from a tradition extending backwards to antiquity, encompassing both pagan and Catholic roots. These genres are clearly derived from the romances featuring tales of chivalry and adventure, though they have evolved greatly over time.

Our presentation of Wolfe disagrees with Roberts not in his conceptualization of the dialectic between Catholicism and Protestantism, which, he argues, created modern science fiction, but in his categorization of Gene Wolfe in particular. Of the notoriously Catholic Wolfe, who is currently one of thirty-four science fiction grandmasters (a list including immediately recognizable names such as Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Ursula K. Le Guin, and, more recently, Samuel R. Delany), Roberts states:

For many critics, the American writer Gene Wolfe (b. 1931) is the most important writer of fiction, in or out of the genre, of the last few decades. Such critics may well be right. By the 1990s it had become clear that, a few short-stories and singleton novels aside, the prolific Wolfe was actually engaged in writing one single enormous novel, rather like Proust – with whom he has occasionally, although erroneously, been compared. (306)

While book blurbs are quick to label Wolfe with superlatives, hopefully by the end of this analysis it will be clear whether this minority opinion on his position in American and World Literature is mere hyperbole.¹ The mystery of Wolfe's work appeals to Roberts more than the solutions which are often put forth in Wolfe criticism, and his book presents a somewhat inexplicable excoriation of Wolfe's *readers and fans*:

Stylistically, Wolfe is a talented writer, although some find his deliberately mannered and archaic idiom a deterrent, and his more recent books rely too much on over-lengthy and expository dialogue. But his great achievement is not stylistic but formal, the creation of a text that construes narrative, character and atmosphere into the ambiguities and complexities of which they are made. Little is straightforward in a Wolfe novel; books can be read and reread again to reveal new perspectives. Like a *nouveau romancier*, or a postmodernist (although Wolfe – a practising [sic] and conservative Catholic – may be surprised to hear that he is called 'postmodern') he deconstructs our assumptions about narrative closure, about the description and working of character and about 'meaning' in a series of challenging ways. Although his books are all 'religious', none of them resolves into straightforward allegory, or even symbolism, although all of them are replete with Christian symbols: roses, fishes, the sun, trinities, and so on. But the action of beginning to decipher the symbols creates more rather than less textual insecurity. The

¹ In addition, it might be worthwhile to state that Wolfe structured much of his opus, *The Book of the New Sun*, after Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Amongst other resonances, Wolfe's series features a narrator with eidetic memory who will reevaluate his life after eating a Chatelaine in a diabolical Eucharist (rather than a madeleine). The use of a mysterious analept transfers her memories to him – though of course a madeleine dipped in tea sounds a more hygienic trigger of involuntary memories to our modern sensibilities. Some lines in *The Book of the New Sun* are even copied wholesale from Proust – branding the comparison erroneous seems intentionally dismissive.

effect of these three complex works is perhaps to baffle the reader used to simpler fare.

(307)

Roberts is probably correct in at least one of these assertions: Wolfe might be bemused at the postmodern label. Much of his fiction actually works to mock subjectivity and assert universals – while his characters might struggle with misunderstandings and poorly apprehended realities, the authorial voice behind the flawed and confused narrators does something quite different. Chapter Two will attempt to ground the idea that Wolfe’s work is almost always invested in exploring universals: only in grasping them do the texts begin to make sense. Roberts’ assertion that the character of the Catholic mind is not rational might explain his inability to contextualize the symbols and allegories Wolfe employs: there is a logic to both Wolfe’s structure and his use of creative symbols that is far more mathematical than that of most other writers generally identified as “inscrutable,” and some of this difficulty can be resolved in understanding the manner through which Wolfe provides narrative closure. My readings of Wolfe stress that he is first and foremost a rigorous symbolist.

Roberts continues:

Because of this, exegesis can become a fetish with fans of Wolfe (several have published lengthy keys to the mystery: Michael Andre-Driussi’s *Lexicon Urthus* (1994), Peter Wright’s *Attending Daedalus: Gene Wolfe, Artifice and the Reader* (2003) and Robert Borski’s *Solar Labyrinth: Exploring Gene Wolfe’s BOOK OF THE NEW SUN* (2004) are three worth mentioning). The watchword for these fans is that his lengthy novels must not only be read but *reread*, often several times, before their beauties and depths become apparent: Wolphiles’ [sic] insistence on this point is sometimes folded into a more generalised [sic] grumpiness about the hectic pace of modern living and the virtues of

close, careful attentiveness to the text. This is a reasonable, if crankily middle-aged, view to hold. But it is also worth noting that, of all the major writers of SF alive today, Wolfe is the one most thoroughly to divide the SF fan base. Many fans have never read him, or have tried to read *New Sun* but have given up. Internet bookshops such as amazon.com, which permit readers to post their reactions to the books they have bought by grading them from 1 star to 5 stars, provide interesting if partial snapshots of general responses to works. Wolfe's books draw extravagant praise and 5-star assessment and extravagant dismissal or hostility and the lowest rankings in about equal measure. (307-8)

As will be illustrated in later chapters, Wolfe actually regularly engages in direct allegorical use of symbols and orthodox Catholic theology; it is *how* he uses them that creates such a problem for readers. Roberts is not alone in claiming that an attempt to decipher and follow certain allusions only creates confusion in reading Gene Wolfe. Peter Wright's *Attending Daedalus*, mentioned above, even claims that the allusions and familiar tropes Wolfe employs, especially in *The Book of the New Sun*, are actually *distractions* and *misdirections*.

It is generally accepted that one of the hallmarks of Wolfe's style involves leaving out conclusions that most genre work would definitely include. In confronting this elided closure, Peter Wright considers Roland Barthe's narrative theory and Wolfgang Iser's gap theory. Iser suggests that meaning is actually something created between writer and reader, and this absence certainly does resonate with the general consensus that Wolfe leaves out certain resolutions which are left to the reader to infer. However, Wright insists that many of the details included in the primary narrative in Wolfe's fiction are somehow actually distractions:

Iser suggests that, in general, readers are drawn '[i]nto the events and [are encouraged to supply] what is meant by what is not said. What is said only appears to take on

significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning.’ In *The Urth Cycle*, this encouragement functions to distract the reader’s attention from the story driving the novel. With his usual sense of fair play, Wolfe covertly warns the reader against becoming lost in the creation of linguistic meaning when Severian remarks:

The speaking of a word is futile unless there are other words. Words that are not spoken ... The powers we call dark seem to me to be the words the Increate did not speak, if the Increate exists at all; and these words must be maintained in a quasi-existence, if the other word, the spoken word, is to be distinguished. What is not said can be important—but what is said is more important. (Sword, p. 182)

Wolfe provides the reader with an ensconced clue not to be deceived by his ‘stereographical plurality’, his multiple allusions that are largely external to the text and of little use to an understanding of the narrative. On one level at least, Wolfe’s ‘dark powers’ are the adumbrative effects of the author’s obscure diction, which are experienced by any reader enticed into making connections between the text, the extraliterary realms of history, popular science, cosmology, and so on, and the critical theories to which Wolfe opens his text.

While Barthes’s considerations of the text and Iser’s gap theory seem to provide useful critical tools for analysing [sic] *The Urth Cycle*, they constitute an additional form of misdirection (Wright, *Attending Daedalus* 139-140)

Of course, Wright ignores that many of these allusions are explicitly “said,” at least metonymically and in part, through the allusions permeating the body of the text. However,

Wright's characterization of Wolfe as a writer, possibly an essential one, is certainly worth considering.

Attending Daedalus starts with a very particular description of Wolfe's artistry and its reception:

While Wolfe has received considerable acclaim for his stylistic versatility, his ability to produce detailed and credible fictional worlds, and his skill at characterisation [sic], he remains one of the most neglected and misunderstood writers of contemporary science fiction and fantasy. [...] Wolfe's work has provoked little academic interest (possibly because of its complexity), except for a number of reviews and articles that have disregarded perhaps the most crucial factor in understanding his writing: the effects on the reader of his literary techniques and strategies. If Wolfe's fiction is to receive the analytical attention it deserves, there is a need therefore to argue why he should be considered as one of the 'most important' writers of SF. (3)

This dissertation attempts to establish that there are many reasons beyond popularity to identify Wolfe as a central figure of literary speculative fiction. As Wright suggests, the relationship between reader and writer is a vital consideration to Wolfe himself, in what might accord with some of Wolfgang Iser's ideas about the ideal reader structured by any given text.² In an introduction to the 1989 short story collection *Endangered Species*, Wolfe takes a jab at the institution of academic literary criticism in his discussion of the essential elements of a story:

Most important, [a story] must have a reader, which is the requirement most frequently overlooked. The same critics who spend hundreds of pages discussing various

² In his phenomenological approach to texts, Iser even posits that the reader is a kind of textual structure

peculiarities of the author's supposed nature often devote none to that much more significant person, the reader for whom he wrote. I do not say this in jest, merely to entertain you; it is a failure that disqualifies a great deal of head-scratching and hypothesizing. It amounts to saying that the letter is more important than its recipient, the signal more important than the changing image created from it, the bait more important than the fish. It is, of course, a totalitarian error, born of the classroom; it springs from the habitual professorial demand that the assigned material be read and his opinion of it be accepted without question [...]

Therefore, let me describe the reader for whom I wrote all these stories. I wrote them for you. Not for some professor or for myself, and certainly not for the various editors who bought them, frequently very reluctantly, after they had been rejected by several others. You see, I am not an academic writing to be criticized. (Academics think the criticism the most important part of the whole process, in which they are wholly wrong.) (Wolfe, *Endangered Species* 1-2)

Wolfe's words close out this introduction perfectly, with a condemnation of the very enterprise this project is attempting. Nonplussed, we shall persevere - boats against the current of a particularly damning authorial deluge. Because of Wolfe's complexity, each chapter will focus on a very distinctive element of his writing before expanding outward to the very idea of intent. Chapter Two will explore the previous critical receptions of Wolfe more thoroughly, selecting several key texts that have been used to argue that he is quintessentially postmodern in nature and analyzing them with some rather traditional critical techniques. Chapter Three will turn to a far more general audience in its examination of Wolfe's work in the context of the collective unconscious and literary history. Wolfe often employs archetypes in his fiction, and it is

completely appropriate to discuss figures such as Carl Jung and Northrop Frye in attempting to understand the objective structures which ground much of Wolfe's most seemingly nebulous work. Chapter Four will rely upon some of the biographical details of Gene Wolfe's life to elucidate his attitude toward narrative structure: as a mechanical engineer and a Catholic, the rigid logic of the scientific world is often married to far more numinous and spiritual elements in his writing. The primary text under examination for this chapter will be the twelve volumes of his *Solar Cycle*. Given Wolfe's allusiveness and recondite reputation, Chapter Five must consider the nature of intertextuality, and we will categorize Wolfe's use of allusions and extratextual details as discussed by such luminaries as Kristeva, expanding the discussion outwards without abandoning the primacy of close reading. Chapter Six will attempt to define a method of reading which seems to yield some definitive solutions in Gene Wolfe's texts: would this approach work for an author with a completely different style and outlook, or is its application limited to Gene Wolfe? Our conclusion in Chapter Seven will tie together many of these elements and ultimately suggest that the highly idiosyncratic ethos of the Catholic engineer requires an approach which lacks universal applicability even as it posits a faith in universal understanding, unity, and objective assessment of authorial intent; it entails a statement about the writing process of one eccentric and explicitly Apollonian author, albeit an important and often critically neglected one.

Chapter Two: Lost in the Pack

Given the exaltation of Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic in the popular aphorisms of education for well over a century, one of my favorite hybrid exercises takes the form of the word problem. No one would argue that a paragraph beginning, “Train A leaves the station heading west at 25 miles an hour at a constant acceleration of 9.2 miles per minute ...” and ending “What is the force of their collision?” could actually be high literature worthy of study, but as a linguistic puzzle setting up a scenario which begs for a “right” and “wrong” solution according to mathematical (and common sense³) understandings, word problems echo some forms of literary analysis, which propose readings that might work given the parameters of the model presented to the reader. In “Resistance to Theory,” Paul De Man questions whether literary mimesis (or linguistic modeling) of a non-linguistic scenario, whether it be hermeneutical, phenomenological, or otherwise, might even be possible. Returning to our opening metaphor, the beauty of word problems, which makes them an excellent tool to prepare scientists and engineers for the “outside the box” reality of their lives as professionals, involves the shifting complexity of this “mimetic” system: those problems can be as simple or as complex as appropriate for their audience (for example, sometimes a problem might explicitly ignore air resistance or, conversely, insist on factoring it into all calculations). Like many other fields, the sciences are often accused of a form of logical positivism, starting with the assumption that our knowledge of the world constantly proceeds and grows, and that it is within our capability to define it with increasing accuracy. Literary critics such as De Man and Jacques Derrida, in working with the

³ In solving second order polynomials, there are often two solutions, and often one is negative. If we are talking about time in the original problem, only the positive value can be correct.

fluctuating web of particularly linguistic systems, acknowledge the great difficulty of approaching language in such a fashion. Can this slippery and subjective language ever present a clear, transcendent model?

Rather than deal in universals, perhaps specific examples will prove more enlightening. In describing a reluctance by many readers to explore literary theory, Paul de Man states:

Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic, considerations or, to put it somewhat less crudely, when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of productions and of reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment ... Literary history, even when considered at the furthest remove from the platitudes of positivistic historicism, is still the history of an understanding of which the possibility is taken for granted. (de Man 7)

The excellent question raised by this line of thought involves our belief in the mimetic possibilities of linguistics itself – can it create a model another being can “inhabit” with precision and accuracy? The relationship between theory and an actual understanding of the text should also be considered. Though quite self-evident, a distinction in literary analysis should be made between the surface “plot elements” of a fictional text and the much more subjective reception of that text: in no readings of *Hamlet* can the prince physically survive. He dies. To claim that his physical body lives at the end of the play is an incomplete reading at best and a misreading at worst⁴. On the plot level, there is more indeterminacy concerning the status of the ghost of Hamlet’s father, but asserting from a modern perspective that the ghost is actually an

⁴ Some critics and readers claim that misreadings are impossible. They probably haven’t taught a Freshman or High School Literature class. Others, such as de Man, take the position that all interpretations are necessarily misreadings.

extraterrestrial alien would obviously be a modern imposition, albeit based on our possibly incomplete historical assumptions of Shakespeare's England: extraterrestrials would not be on his mind. However, our freedom in asserting that Ophelia and Gertrude are treated shamefully and problematically, or are caricatures of women, is a freedom of reception completely beyond the playwright's purview and any consideration of "misreading." The aforementioned ghost, though Hamlet himself speculates on its nature as a deceiving demon, seems to be proven genuine by the further developments in the play. In sophisticated Modernist works (like the major works of James Joyce), however, even "what happened here?" plot-level questions become increasingly difficult to answer without making assumptions and analytical leaps, where the language itself becomes resistant to "easy" comprehension. The writer's compositional decisions in producing works such as *Finnegans Wake* give language a kind of strange and amorphous quality. The work demands interpretation, but can a definitive reading be established when the language Joyce employs is being stretched well beyond all dictionary connotations?

In "Performing Literary Interpretation," K. M. Newton states:

All interpretations may be open to revision in the light of new documents [...] or new methodologies being brought to bear on the surviving documents, but this does not compromise the claim that 'construing' aims at 'truth', whereas 'allegorizing modes of interpretation are inherently relativistic. But the assumption underlying this argument is that literary interpretation is fundamentally similar as an interpretive practice to interpretation in other forms of discourse. In relation to non-literary forms of discourse, the concept of 'misreading' is an uncomfortable one. Though there may be a recognition that interpretation can never arrive at 'truth' in an absolute sense, in virtually all forms of discourse apart from literary-critical discourse, the driving force of interpretation is that it

constantly attempts to get as close to ‘truth’ as possible. Literary interpretation, in contrast, is much more comfortable with the concept of ‘misreading’ because, I would argue, ‘truth’ is alien to the activity of literary interpretation. Misreading is not, as it were, a necessary evil, but is intrinsic to literary interpretation. (480)

Intentionally difficult and allusive authors have at times followed the lead of creators such as T.S. Eliot and the New Critics in eschewing the idea of authorial intent, but to assert that literary interpretation is not at all invested in getting nearer to a kind of truth seems to ignore the fact that artists are often asked specifically about their work and what they were trying to “do” in it by the public. While it may not be standard practice for *every* literary critic, unearthing the letters between an artist and their friends and loved ones, scouring interviews, and excavating personal authorial history are all a part of the discourse surrounding literature, commonly referenced without controversy in literary monographs and biographies. Of course, the uncertainty here involves the efficacy of the language which seeks to express intangible ideas to another human being with very different starting assumptions and core beliefs.

Recent theoretical developments have begun to cast aside what has commonly been branded as the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” which assumes a barrier between writer and reader before the book is ever opened. Literary movements such as the New Sincerity have attempted to move beyond the implied distrust inherent to some postmodern and deconstructive theories. In his 2017 book *The Varieties of Authorial Intention: Literary Theory beyond the Intentional Fallacy*, John Farrell breaks down many of the features of language and of literary texts which are clearly aspects of uncontroversial intent. He mentions the work of Lisa Ruddick, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Rita Felski, and others who are currently questioning the suspicious and abstract idea that text are inherently deceptive. Many of these scholars are working on aesthetic

and emotional approaches to literature removed from the instability taken for granted by poststructural critics. Unfortunately, sometimes Gene Wolfe invites a suspicious reading of the surface narrative of his texts in many complex ways. It might be accurate to characterize some of his fiction as being highly engineered. The assembling of appropriate words and motifs in a narrative might easily be considered as a kind of highly organized engineering. However, one of theorist Jacques Derrida's more interesting thoughts involves identifying the web of language and the literary as *bricolage* rather than engineering. According to his definitions, the engineer seeks out an understanding through a "transcendent signified" which is "a theological idea ... that we need to fulfill our desire for plenitude and authority" (Derrida xx). In the preface to "Of Grammatology," the translator Gayatri Spivak identifies this need as a nostalgia:

Derrida does not offer the obverse of this nostalgia. He does not see in the method of the so-called exact sciences an epistemological model of exactitude. All knowledge, whether one knows it or not, is a species of *bricolage*, with its eye on the myth of "engineering." But that myth is always totally other, leaving an originary trace within "bricolage." Like all "useful" words, "bricolage" must also be placed "under erasure." For it can only be defined by its difference from its opposite—"engineering." Yet that opposite, a metaphysical norm, can in fact never be present and thus, strictly speaking, there is no concept of "bricolage" (that which is not engineering). Yet the concept must be used—untenable but necessary. "From the moment that we cease to believe in such an engineer ... as soon as it is admitted that every finite discourse is bound by a certain *bricolage*, ... the very idea of *bricolage* is menaced and the difference in which it took on its meaning decomposes." (Derrida xx)

While Derrida's own expansion of this idea is more elaborate and involved, for the purposes of

this analysis, the idea of expressing anything with language will be considered an act which necessarily involves considering the text itself as either a patchwork, motley, and slapdash concoction or an organized, rigid, and confident product of the engineer. Fittingly, the primary subject of this study, Gene Wolfe, worked as an industrial engineer for many years, and we hope to establish through historical, objective, and aesthetic priorities that sometimes reader and writer can share the same engineered mimetic space – though this is far from universal and self-evident.

Before turning to some specific examples from Wolfe’s fiction, there are two difficulties inherent in writing and reading worth mentioning. Paul de Man asserts:

Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge ‘reality,’ but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language. (11)

That uncertainty leads to our specific problem in dealing with Gene Wolfe. Anyone who frequents discussion boards such as the old *Urth Mailing List* or the subreddit devoted to Gene Wolfe will soon find that it is very easy to get into a heated argument about what actually happened in any particular novel or short story. Some people, such as Murray Ewing, even assert that there is no secret to grasp in reading Gene Wolfe, in what might be a proclamation tantamount to “the emperor has no clothes.” Ewing discusses his trepidation in approaching Wolfe:

Gene Wolfe has a reputation as being one of those writers whose books [and] stories you have to read twice. He buries subtle clues in what the Wikipedia article about him calls his “dense, allusive prose”. He uses unreliable narrators. In reviews, people talk about “getting” him, or “not getting” him, making it sound as though there’s a secret to reading

Wolfe, a special technique you don't need for other writers. So, when I came to read him, I found myself asking questions I wouldn't normally ask. Was I going to have to take notes? Was I going to have to disbelieve everything his narrators said? Was I going to have to buy a new, bigger dictionary? And of course, was it really going to be worth it? Sometimes a reputation like Wolfe's can be a writer's worst enemy, or a reader's. It overloads your enjoyment of them with expectations no writer can meet — and, when I think about it, I, as a reader, don't really want. Do I really want to read a writer with a reputation for being “difficult”? Where's the fun in that? Reading should be fun, after all. Here, Ewing hones on one of the most frequent descriptions of Wolfe: he writes in such a way that there is an immediate and possibly insurmountable barrier between the words on the page, the intent of the author as creator, and the reader's basic conception of the narrative. Ewing continues:

But there's also something so attractive about that sort of reputation — Wolfe seems to be offering something other writers don't have. Surely he's worth a try? So I tried. And, at first, I stumbled. But something drew me on. I kept finding myself buying another book by him, giving him another go. Now, two fat novels, two thin novels, and two collections of short stories later, I'm beginning to get a handle on Gene Wolfe. And the first part of that “getting a handle” on him has been learning to forget the reputation. With a writer like Wolfe, it's all too easy to bamboozle yourself into thinking there's loads of things you're missing, all sorts of tricks and literary techniques, levels of significance and meaning, going on that are somehow subtly above your head. But when it comes down to it, Wolfe is just doing what all good writers do — he's using words to tell a story. If you start with that, things begin to make sense.

Wolfe's introduction to *Endangered Species* might even support this approach, and it is well worth considering that his primary goal is in telling a good story. However, many analytical arguments could be made against this passive assessment of Gene Wolfe: it truly does risk missing "understanding" the work. In "Some Greek Themes in Gene Wolfe's Latro Novels," Jeremy Crampton also takes up this theme by asking a question about Wolfe's audience:

The [general characterization of Wolfe's style] goes something like this: Wolfe's writing is too complex, too literary and too unclear for the "common" reader (it sometimes has the rider that despite this, he writes beautifully). James Gunn's comment is representative of this attitude when he notes that Wolfe's earlier short fiction "was usually difficult, often ambiguous, sometimes obscure, and always skillfully written". In Lane, Vernon, & Carson his writing is described as "highly literary, fascinating science fiction that repaid careful reading. It [is] complex but approachable, new but old, psychological but concrete." Even critics who are largely favourable [sic] towards Wolfe can take this stance. For example, John Clute has written in *Strokes*:

Perhaps what's necessary with Wolfe's work is to train ourselves in the kind of close critical reading of texts that serious critics of the Modernist and Post-Modernist novel assume to be absolutely mandatory just for starters, with understanding to come later, after some work has been done.

Crampton goes on to suggest that this attitude creates a kind of literary elitism that surrounds Wolfe: only those with the time and resources to invest in plumbing the depths of his work could hope to achieve understanding. His article continues, "It could be argued, that Wolfe has 'deserted' the common reader." What of Wolfe's assertion that stories are to be enjoyed and shared with his readers, and the somewhat obvious attitude teeming behind the various

introductions in which Wolfe paints academics as figures who actually sever the relationship between readers and texts, rather than encourage it? Crampton continues to examine whether Wolfe is unsuitable for the average reader, and offers two responses to that possibility:

Both admit that Wolfe is a complex, ambiguous writer – a necessary admission in my view, though not an alienating one. Not necessarily alienating because first, such complexity is not a disadvantage, but an opportunity for readers to engage with the novel at the level with which they are most comfortable. In other words, it's a hierarchical description: there is a "surficial" level, such as the adventure of (say) the picaresque Severian in *The Book of the New Sun*. But there is also a "chthonic," underground level, where deeper religious or metaphysical elements find their expression (here we might cite Severian's political agenda in writing *The Book of the New Sun*). Readers are able to engage with the work at either level.

This is one reason why Wolfe, although dealing with some of the most traditionally "difficult" issues of literature such as love, death, goodness, evil and morality, chooses to frame them in landscapes and frameworks that are superficially exciting and unusual, such as the Commonwealth, or ancient Greece. Wolfe is sometimes asked why he chooses to write within the genre, and his plain man's answer is usually that that's what he would like to read himself, and that he doesn't consciously write "to" genre [...]. There is little doubt that Wolfe's use of blatant stereotypes and clichés (such as giants, castles and duels), are resonantly attractive, presumably because they remind us of childhood fairy tales and stories. At the same time Wolfe pushes ever deeper into the complexities and ambiguities of real life. He uses the clichés of genre in order to transcend them and thus reinvest them with meaning.

Crampton here admits that there are levels to Wolfe's fiction, but that it is not necessary to pierce them to appreciate the texts. However, returning to Adam Roberts' earlier assertion that the reader response to Wolfe is widely variable, we can see a hostility towards the idea that Wolfe's work displays textual ambiguity and richness while still firmly existing within generic boundaries:

But before Wolphiles simply dismiss the latter reactions [1 star reviews on amazon.com] as bred of ignorance and a pig-headed resistance to the beautiful complexities of a deliberately difficult writer, they need to confront the fact that some SF critics of great distinction have shared this dislike. 'I cannot stand postmodernists', announces Darko Suvin, adding, 'I cannot follow the semantic and diegetic contortions of Gene Wolfe, fleeing the Master Narrative ... I shamelessly confess I prefer a good story by Heinlein, Cherryh or Gwyneth Jones to most philosophies, since they show me worlds with actions, resistances and psychozoa for whom both mean something.' (Suvin, p. 241)

'Contortions' is a little unfair; although his books *are* complex, serpentine and cat's cradle-like it gives the wrong impression of Wolfe (always an elegant, controlled writer) to call him 'contorted'. But Suvin gives voice to a widespread suspicion, not that Wolfe is a bad writer exactly (Suvin concedes that there are 'some impressive facets to his major series'), but that the kind of writing he practises [sic] is a wrong turn in the development of prose SF. We are back, in other words, to mourning the loss of Bergonzi's nineteenth-century criteria: 'characters, story, atmosphere'. (308)

Roberts continues with a backhanded assessment of Wolfe which is surely indicative of his relatively low regard for the very idea of "puzzle-box" fiction and what Wolfe is doing:

My sense is that Wolfe has more to fear from some of his enthusiasts than his opponents. It is fair enough, if one enjoys puzzles and games, to treat Wolfe's fiction as a gigantic textual box of puzzles and games. But to read only ludically is to miss the main point of Wolfe's writing, which is always serious ('playfully serious' sounds merely oxymoronic, but comes close to the truth). His work is engaged in a genuinely profound excavation of the core dialectic of SF, the relationship between the material and the spiritual. *The Book of the New Sun* is very finely constructed to balance precisely on this knife-edge: it can be read throughout as heroic Fantasy (in which matters are explicable in terms of magic) or as science fiction (in which the various wonders have a technical, material explanation), and is as often categorised [sic] with one genre as the other. The point of this is not the categorising [sic] itself; it is rather that Wolfe's aesthetic is concerned with these matters because they relate to the world in a genuinely problematic manner. Many of the things humanity used, formerly, to attribute to God can now be explained in ways that leave no space for the divine. If the search is pushed as far as it can go, outwards to the stars and throughout time, do we come to a *pou sto*, an ultimate standing-place that we must concede to be God? Wolfe's dramas usually dramatise [sic] this quest, with many creatures that initially appear to be gods revealed later to be artefacts [sic]. There are many blind alleys, much misdirection, and the crucial points often appear minor, easily ignored, on first view: the involutions, and evolutions, of this search acts as template for Wolfe's plotting. (308-309)

Of course, here Roberts suggests that even the prominent critic Darko Suvin can do little with Wolfe's decentered and cluttered postmodern fiction. He is not alone in expressing this confusion. In what is my favorite quote concerning the understanding of Gene Wolfe's work,

critic Bruce Gillespie states, “Anybody who can see definitely what Gene Wolfe’s fiction is all about is a liar or a fool or Gene Wolfe” (12). In approaching Wolfe’s texts, this statement suggests that Gillespie has not found a logical method for reading Wolfe, which I propose should incorporate a playful, a spiritual, and, above all, a meticulously recondite sensibility. This reading process sometimes involves meticulous research and occasionally requires some intuition, but it can yield results.

The idea that Wolfe subverts the tropes of a fairly traditional genre (before the New Wave in SF, that is) might be found in any review or analysis of his work. In the first extended monograph on Gene Wolfe, Joan Gordon explores the distinctions that make Wolfe’s fiction so difficult even for readers used to the tropes of science fiction:

Wolfe’s psychological stories are far from typical of the science-fiction traditions and conventions. For readers raised on Clarke, Asimov, and Heinlein, Wolfe’s stories don’t “feel” like science fiction precisely because they de-emphasize the empirical reality so many science-fiction writers stress to give their concocted worlds credibility. . . . Not only is Gene Wolfe’s speculative fiction atypical, it is demanding as well, and demanding to a degree some science-fiction readers find uncomfortable. The notion that science fiction provides light, escapist reading has just enough truth to make many of its readers expect stories which contain straightforward, unadorned plots and style, though they may also contain disturbing, thought-provoking, or scientifically sophisticated elements. Wolfe’s stories are, in contrast, ambiguous in their implications and conclusions. They are lucid, yet mysterious and baroque, and leave unprepared and unsophisticated readers baffled.

(8)

An excellent example of Wolfe's craftsmanship and obsession with the themes of perception, egoism, and the nature of empirical reality might be found in his first truly reputable story. While he had published some minor short stories during college at the start of the 1950s before he was drafted into the Korean War, Wolfe did not begin publishing professionally until 1965. In 1967, his fifth published story, "Trip, Trap," was accepted in Damon Knight's influential and stylish *Orbit* series. As Wolfe related at a question and answer session during the 2013 Nebulas in which he received the Damon Knight Grand Master of Science Fiction title, he submitted "Trip, Trap" to Damon Knight in a format that was as "asinine as you could imagine." Since the story split its point of view between two very different characters, that of a pacifist academic interested in languages and culture and that of a seasoned warrior of an alien civilization, Wolfe had written the two view-points side by side in columns. Damon Knight suggested that the view-points alternate and sent his suggestions on where to break the text back to Wolfe. Finding that he could not improve on Knight's suggestions, Wolfe accepted the format changes. While the story is not as structurally elaborate as many of his later novels and novellas, it serves as an excellent entry point to Wolfe's worldview. In my introduction to the story in *Between Light and Shadow*, I draw attention to the similarity between the words Trip and Trap in the title and also emphasize their folk-tale origin:

Note the semiotic slip of one letter in the title—it is the vowel which creates completely different words though the surrounding letters are the same. Thus it is that the story from which Damon Knight grew Wolfe from a bean is perfectly named, as the examination of how certain objective signs can be internalized differently—for one an innocuous exploratory trip, for another a danger filled heroic battle, and for the third a mental trap of misconception and insanity from which only death can release him. Of course, this is also

the sound made by the three goats as they crossed the bridge over the troll in “Three Billy Goats Gruff,” but Wolfe has constructed the story so that the title resonates on multiple levels. Gene has stated that this story is the one that truly began his writing career.

(Aramini)

In *Attending Daedalus*, Peter Wright introduces the theme of “Trip, Trap” as follows:

Wolfe developed the theme of subjectivity in ‘Trip, Trap’ (1967) (*Storeys*, pp. 214–39), a short story that relates the adventures of Dr Morton Melville Finch, PhD, an extraterrestrial anthropologist working among the natives of Carson III. The narrative is presented in an epistolary form that alternates Finch’s letters to his university with reports sent by a Carsonian, Garth, to his sovereign, the Protector of the West Lands. Although both men experience the same events, each describes them from a different perspective. Their often contrary observations contribute to a vivid (and humorous) representation of the human mind’s inability to perceive the ‘reality of reality’. This theme becomes explicit when Finch and Garth encounter a *traki*, which Finch recognises [sic] as an alien shape-shifter, but which Garth believes to be a troll. The *traki* explains: ‘YOU CAN NEVER SEE ME OBJECTIVELY, YOUR RACE BEING WITHOUT OBJECTIVE PERCEPTION. THE SHAPE YOU SEE NOW IS SUBJECTIVELY CORRECT, WHICH IS THE WAY YOU DEFINE REALITY.’ (24)

This basic plot synopsis works: Dr. Finch, overconfident in his attempts to blend in with the native populace, commits many faux pas and transgressions which would have resulted in his death if Garth did not treat him with a soft touch. In addition, the pomp and circumstance with which Garth describes all of his actions is undercut by Finch immediately: the parade to celebrate the triumphant procession glamorized by Garth consists of a few sullen boys throwing

clouds of dirt in Finch's version. Of course, the story does not exist in a vacuum, and anyone familiar with children's stories or nursery rhymes probably recognizes its title. In "Three Billy Goats Gruff," the sibling goats come to a bridge under which a troll lives. The first and second goats, smaller than their eldest sibling, are insufficient to fight the troll, but dangle the possibility of luring bigger prey before the predator under the bridge. Unfortunately for the troll, the third Billy Goat Gruff is too large and powerful, ramming it to its doom. Wolfe has clearly developed the central conflict with the *traki* under the bridge in "Trip, Trap" from this source, no matter how many sophisticated science fictional elements are included. The *traki* overestimates itself just as the troll in the children's story does.

Peter Wright claims:

The *traki*'s idealist view of human perception is partly Platonic, inasmuch as Plato perceived the body, 'that which brings us in touch with the world of external reality ... as a distorting medium, causing us to see through a glass darkly'. For the Platonic Wolfe, the senses form a barrier that prevents the comprehension of a larger, external reality. The *traki*'s suggestion of an objective reality beyond the subjective vision framed for the human mind by the senses draws Wolfe back from the brink of solipsism. Wolfe is not arguing that everything the mind perceives is a product of that mind. Rather, he is emphasising [sic] his belief in an objective universe that cannot be perceived accurately through the senses because an individual codifies and quantifies that universe according to his or her expectations and experiences. (24)

Many have read the story as a destabilization of reality and the multiplication of valid viewpoints, but Wright and I might agree in part: no matter how subjective each of the character's viewpoints are in "Trip, Trap," the story does not challenge the existence of an

objective reality – it merely dwells at length on the limitations of human perception, especially those influenced by ego. Because the accounts of Finch and Garth are so distinct, many readers might first assume that there is no room for those intrinsically different world views to interact. Dr. Finch prides himself on being a pacifist and vegetarian, and he believes himself incapable of violence. Garth thinks Finch effete and weak, but the power of the *traki*, which has survived on Garth's home planet for centuries, is able to completely overwhelm his senses: Garth is useless against the *traki*, his vision and all of his means of perceiving the outside world subject to the *traki*'s distortions. Nevertheless, their enemy is slain, and both main characters return to their individual lives. The Wolfewiki, a source of information devoted to Gene Wolfe, claims that there are some unresolved questions left at the end of the story:

Did Finch kill the *traki* and then blame it on Garth in his communique to Beatty?

Likewise, did Garth take credit for killing the *traki* in his communique to his Protector?

Finch claims he lost consciousness, but, when Garth comes out of his trance, Finch is covered in blood, holding his sword, which is also covered in blood. Their respective stories that Garth killed the *traki* in the "spirit world" seems rather dubious given the blood on the sword. ("Trip, Trap")

This entire line of questioning fails to apprehend that, in the climax of the story, Finch and Garth achieve a union that spiritually forms the third goat, on a higher plane of existence; the story implies a very particular relationship between matter and spirit.

In his assessment of perception in the story, Peter Wright continues:

Finch can only perceive the *traki* analogously (as a four-armed ape or a manifestation of Professor Beatty from his university): the creature's actual nature is impossible for him to determine.

The notion of an objective universe existing beyond the senses recalls Hegel's suggestion that 'nothing ... is ultimately and completely real except the whole'. Hegel conceived of the notion of the whole as a complex system of the sort that we should call an organism. The apparently separate things of which the world seems to be composed are not simply an illusion; each has a greater or lesser degree of reality, and its reality consists in an aspect of the whole, which is what it is seen to be when viewed truly.

The *traki* is part of one such complex system, a system of which Finch and the reader remain unaware. Its existence is a manifestation of a 'lesser degree of reality' and a part of a larger 'whole'. Its reality, that is, its precise characteristics and function, cannot be deduced unless its relationship to, and purpose within, the whole can be determined. As a vision of the whole is not provided in the story, the *traki* remains an enigma and its own subjectivity—of which it is unaware—becomes a source of irony. (Wright, *Attending Daedalus* 24-5)

It is worth noting that the story, when the conclusion is seen holistically, does not actually have to be considered in such complex terms. Dr. Finch cannot act because of his mental reservations in killing the *traki*, even though the creature has no control over his senses; Garth cannot act because even though he is willing to kill, he cannot accurately perceive where or what the *traki* is, subject as he is to its ability to distort his senses. Doctor Finch and Garth are the two goats inadequate to the task at hand, but the title of Wolfe's short story is actually derived from the bridge they cross:

"Trip, trap, trip, trap! " went the bridge.

"Who's that tripping over my bridge?" roared the troll.

"Oh, it is only I, the tiniest Billy Goat Gruff, and I'm going up to the hillside to make myself fat," said the billy goat, with such a small voice.

"Now, I'm coming to gobble you up," said the troll.

"Oh, no! pray don't take me. I'm too little, that I am," said the billy goat. "Wait a bit till the second Billy Goat Gruff comes. He's much bigger." (Ashliman)

Eventually, the largest goat proves far too much for the troll. In a truly fascinating development in Wolfe's story which is worth looking at in its entirety, Finch and Garth are able to join their minds together in a kind of spirit realm, where Finch's vision and Garth's puissance allow them to truly cooperate against the *traki* and slaughter it. This metaphorical "bridge" between them is the primary point of the story. In the climax, Finch has brought a wand-like weapon with him which incapacitates the creature, but as he picks up a more lethal sword to threaten it, the *traki* touches his mind:

"YOU WILL NOT KILL ME. THE SLAYER IS NOT IN YOU. YOU HAVE BEEN TAUGHT ALL YOUR SHORT LIFE THAT THERE EXISTS NO GREATER CRIME THAN TAKING THE LIFE OF AN INTELLIGENCE. EVEN WHEN YOU CAME TO THIS WORLD WHERE DEATH COMES SO OFTEN. YOU BROUGHT ONLY A WEAPON WHICH DOES NOT KILL. AND I AM WITHOUT DEFENSE." (Wolfe, "Trip, Trap" 258)

In response, Finch tries to act:

I raised the sword for a blow, but as I did I realized that the *traki* was right. My arm shook and my stomach was a writhing knot. In my imagination I could hear the hiss of that life-defiling blade, felt the tug and release as it clove the vertebrae and the gushing, sticky bath of hot blood; worst of all I knew in anticipation the haunting sense of

uncleanness, of my own self-condemnation, lifelong without hope of absolution. I wished that it were I who stood in such danger of dissolution, and I lost consciousness. (258)

The scene immediately shifts to an internal landscape from the point of view of the physically incapacitated Garth, but readers are certainly aware that Doctor Finch is willing to live and die by the courage of his convictions to avoid taking life. As Garth trudges through the strange spirit realm into which he has been cast by the troll, his senses are continually assaulted:

I could see no pursuers, but the humming noise waxed ever louder and I feared it without knowing why. I do not believe, Supremacy, that I would have felt so in the country of men; in the spirit land some enchantment draws away a warrior's blood, leaving a cold juice supporting life but not valor.

I was about to run again when I spied something glittering at my feet. It was a piece of red glass – such stuff as the priests use to form pictures on the windows of temples. It was broken and useless; yet before I could reflect on what I did I had snatched it up and thrust it among other such litter in a bag of knotted grass I had slung about my shoulders. I cannot tell why I did so foolish a thing or why I felt so vain about it, like a country wench with a new ribbon. [...]

The roaring of the blood in my ears was so loud that I did not hear another running in the valley I crossed until he was nearly upon me. He was as naked as I, and his long hair hung down in a filthy mat, but I would have kissed him as a brother had there been time, so happy was I to see a human face in that grim land.

He shouted to me – words I had never heard before, yet they were as clear to me as West Speech – “This way! You are lost. Follow me!” (259)

When Garth sees the bridge before him, he recoils in fear, knowing that a troll lives beneath it, but his companion bolsters him, even though, in the spirit world, the point of Garth's sword has already been shattered. Soon, they stand together, even as the trolls in the spirit world multiply beyond all measure and confront them:

One of the trolls dismounted then, and my gaze was drawn to him. He was larger than any forest devil and the muscles stood out under his skin and flickered as he moved. Had he been but a beast he would have been such as to chill the heart of the boldest hunter, but he was no mere animal. His eyes were of the yellow-green of seacoal fire and blazed more fiercely – level as a man's and filled with terrible wisdom. Strangely wrought weapons hung from his belt, and when I looked upon them, memories that were not mine came rushing into my mind, and I seemed to see naked men and women and children rent to pieces as if by thunderbolts.

By force of will I tore my gaze from them and looked about me lest I be taken from behind; and as I looked the other trolls seemed to fade and become less real, so that I knew they were but the creatures of his art where in truth only his spirit and mine stood alone. ...

Then in an instant all I saw was gone. I stood in the troll's den once more, swaying and grasping my true sword with a weak hand. The troll was before me still, older now, and bereft of the terrible weapons which had dangled from his belt before.

Then he laughed loud and deep, and I was again on the hillock. Scarce able to stand, I lashed his great arm with my wand and it snapped half off; as he grasped me the darkness closed upon me once more as it had on the bridge, but I struck him with the shattered stub of my stick until I knew no more. When I woke again the troll's cave was

better lit than when I had previously seen it, though light no longer rose from the pool. Instead a great brightness issued from a silver wand no longer than a man's finger which lay in the mud close to Dockerfins. I had seen too much that day to fear anything, however strange, and plucking it from the muck, I used its light to search out the hole. My sword I found in Dockerfins' hand, it and he both drenched in the troll's dark blood; the grim mock-man himself lay not much farther off, all cut about with gaping wounds from which the blood no longer welled. At the first sight I thought it strange to see that the point had never told, but soon I understood all, as you, Supremacy, wiser than ever I, no doubt do now. For when Dockerfins awoke he was as one deep in drink or drug, babbling and unheeding. Then I knew that his body had but fought here the battle my own spirit had won from the troll in the spirit land, and his soul was scarce returned, alone and affrighted to its proper place. That his untenanted husk could not use my sword's point was thus explained, for the sword's spirit was maimed when it broke in my hand.

(260-1)

In the spirit realm, the point of Garth's sword has been lost, but in the material world to which Garth awakens, he finds that Doctor Finch (or, to Garth, Dockerfins) has served as a physical vessel for Garth's own spiritual battle; the point of the blade no longer functions in the material world, though it is still physically present. The questions posed by the Wolfewiki about the death of the *traki* ignore the logical conclusions supplied by the text and posit a dishonesty that is simply not present in either narrator: the physical world of the senses and of individual bias, even the world of physical laws, is ontologically dependent on a higher realm of spirit and mind, one in which true communion is possible. In almost Neoplatonic fashion, the hierarchy of spiritual and material realms is manifested in the story, and matter occupies the lowest rung of reality.

Garth and Finch join forces and finally act in union; the real world is that of the spirit, as perhaps the broken red glass from some religious building Garth retrieves symbolizes. While this might be considered a dualistic framework, it also lets us draw a very simple message from the story: it is actually a didactic fable warning against the distorting power of ego and self-absorption, undercutting the absolute idea of existence as subjective.

The powerful *traki* thinks that it is the immortal scion of a powerful intergalactic race, but while it has endured for ages, it lives in squalor under a bridge, just as the troll does in “Three Billy Goats Gruff.” A look at the denouement of the story makes clear that the *traki*, no matter how it was born, dies a filthy troll covered in mud – that is the reality of its situation, devoid of ego. “Trip, Trap” has an ending that is as straightforward and clear as any story Wolfe ever wrote, but readers still attempt to attribute a great amount of unreliability to the narrative viewpoints because they are extending the subjective and ironic viewpoints of the narrators to an authorial position. That subjective chasm is overcome within the text in an act of spiritual cooperation.

In his discussion of “Trip, Trap,” Peter Wright continues to complicate matters in his introduction of Hegel, and draws this cosmological conclusion, which he then attempts to apply to the rest of Wolfe’s work:

Hegel’s distinction between the appearance of ‘the apparently separate things of which the world seems composed’ and its reality as ‘an aspect of the whole’ is a sustained theme in Wolfe’s fiction. His protagonists, because of their reception of information through the senses and their specific spatio-temporal locations, are incapable of perceiving the whole and often misconceive the nature of what they experience.

Like the psychologist, Hermann Helmholtz, Wolfe understands that sensory signals only have significance as the result of associations built up by learning. We are essentially separate from the world of objects, and isolated from external physical events, except for neural signals which, somewhat like language, must be learned and read according to various assumptions, which may or may not be appropriate.

Helmholtz's observations are useful in approaching Wolfe's work as they introduce two notions relevant to a wider understanding of his fiction: the concept of association, which features in Finch's misconception of the *traki's* appearance and is intrinsically important to the structure, characterisation [sic] and deflative qualities found in *The Urth Cycle*; and the incidence of visual illusions. Helmholtz suggests that

We usually refer to incorrect inductive inferences concerning the meaning of our perceptions as illusions of the senses. For the most part they are the result of incomplete inductive inferences. (25)

While such assertions are certainly possible, "Trip, Trap" can make perfect sense to the reader as a homage to a fairy story which ultimately criticizes ego: it is not some insuperable feature of reality that separates Finch and Garth, but their own transitory preconceptions and sense of self-importance. Is it possible to put these aside? In my reading of the story, they certainly do, and ultimately form something new. Thus, the story does not necessarily need to become a monument to the illusory qualities of the senses, but a lesson about attempting to see things from another point of view and avoid the trap of "I." The closing sentence of the story is actually written by Finch's academic supervisor Beatty, and it drives home the ironic ubiquity of unexamined selfish arrogance in its final ellipsis:

I had to write my article for *Arch. Worlds* (the one that stirred up all this symposium rubbish) on the very sketchy information in your letter; how sketchy it was you will note in the clipping I'm having transmitted with this. I gave you full credit, as you will see. It is the paragraph beginning: "I sent an investigator..." (Wolfe, "Trip, Trap" 263)

To Beatty, giving someone full credit involves emphasizing his own importance first and foremost, and this omnipresent thematic motif of the story suggests exactly how subjectivity can be overcome – through the simple surrender of ego.

However, it is important to note that "Trip, Trap's" hierarchical approach to the material world, subordinating it to a spiritual reality, might be fruitfully observed in much of Wolfe's other fiction. Along with the ironic distance between the author and the narrators (which, in the case of "Trip, Trap," becomes infinitely clear in the juxtaposition of two tonally distinct voices narrating the same events), the material world of the text becomes a palimpsest for deeper truths. One of Wolfe's greatest triumphs in showing how subjective barriers of perception might still hide a greater truth can be found in a much longer work, his masterful Soldier series, featuring the Roman mercenary Latro. The three volumes of this series were published in 1986, 1989, and 2007. While Peter Wright treats the Soldier series as a kind of Rosetta Stone for Wolfe's earlier work, the seminal *Book of the New Sun* (1980-1984), Nick Gevers takes a far more interesting approach to the material in claiming that it is in fact indicative of Wolfe's refusal to assert absolute truth. Much as in "Trip, Trap," I feel that a diametrically opposite theme dominates the subtext of the series.

In general, Gevers usually emphasizes the impossibility of self-knowledge in Wolfe's fiction. Of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, which we shall discuss more in-depth in Chapter Six, he notes:

Wolfe's emphasis is on the quest for self-definition. He reveals the obstacles to this by the use of Gothic techniques and the Dystopian situations of Science Fiction. This chapter shows how Wolfe's characters are menaced, and their identities submerged by the pressure of family and genetics, by colonialism, by the tyranny of an authoritarian government and its prison. The quest for identity is made still more complex by confusion of human and alien, of Self and Other, and by narrative modes that problematize the narrator's identity. [...] Wolfe offers almost no hope of self-knowledge and integrity. (ii-iii)

Gevers claims that in Wolfe's fusion of philosophy and religion with spaceships, sword, and sorcery, he has gone farther than any other author in lending legitimacy and depth to his genre:

He has introduced with complete success the styles of the confessional and of magical realism into a field where their previous use was halting and unsatisfactory. He has elaborately deconstructed the ideology and iconography of Science Fiction, exposing their superficialities even as he moulds [sic] them into new and more powerful forms. He has brought a poeticism and experimental genius to a literature which has been immensely enriched thereby; already his influence can be seen in the excellent work of Orson Scott Card, David Zindell, Elizabeth Hand, Dan Simmons, and even the magical realists such as Pat Murphy, Ian McDonald, and (possibly) Lucius Shepard. (Gevers vi)

Gevers overarching thesis is one that he especially emphasizes in his analysis of the Soldier series, and it should be considered carefully, as I will assert that Wolfe's subtext implies something quite opposite:

Wolfe is an eclectic writer, who emphasizes the absence of absolute truths and reliable systems of thought in the world. He uses different religions, styles, national outlooks in

his fictions; he is allusive, calling on countless different mythologies, languages, and literatures to lend resonance to his writing. (xii)

Gene Wolfe's syncretism allows the absolute truth to seem so pervasive and all-consuming that it can sometimes be elided entirely and still be used to reassemble broken narrative fragments into a unified whole, in which darkness can come to light and ambiguity transform into certainty.

While this approach to reading Gene Wolfe might bear some resemblance to Wolfgang Iser's gap theory, where that which is left out also suggests a kind of meaning which can be recreated, it also asserts a rather out-of-fashion Structuralist certainty in universal structures of reference.

Symbols are rigorous and logical in Wolfe's hands, but their meaning is not always immediately obvious. Adam Roberts asserts, as we discussed earlier, that attempting to follow symbols in Wolfe to their natural end only results in more confusion. As Wolfe's most famous hero, the redeemed torturer Severian who serves as the narrator of *The Book of the New Sun* says:

We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges. When soldiers take their oath they are given a coin, an asimi stamped with the profile of the Autarch. Their acceptance of that coin is their acceptance of the special duties and burdens of military life – they are soldiers from that moment, though they may know nothing of the management of arms. I did not know that then, but it is a profound mistake to believe that we must know of such things to be influenced by them, and in fact to believe so is to believe in the most debased and superstitious kind of magic. The would-be sorcerer alone has faith in the efficacy of pure knowledge; rational people know that things act of themselves or not at all. (Wolfe, *Shadow and Claw* 14).

This is perhaps the most overtly symbolist statement to be found in Wolfe's corpus, and it asserts the reality of pre-existing symbols and systems independent of human consciousness and perception. In a very simplified restatement, while there may be cultural and historical reasons that a crucifix and a Star of David represent Christianity and Judaism, respectively, one does not even need to be consciously aware of those ancient historical contexts and their original meaning to appreciate that they symbolize something very specifically. On a more complex level, this reaches back to early anthropological claims of universal structures of the human mind and towards an almost Platonic idea of perfect representation – a sensibility of the ancient world rather than of Postmodernism. These pre-existing structures of meaning are very important to understanding Wolfe's Soldier series, featuring the amnesiac Latro as its protagonist.

Set during the Persian invasion of Greece, the Soldier books offer the story of a wounded mercenary known to his friends as Latro (a name which can mean "brigand" or even "thief"). His head wound at the temple of Demeter has robbed him of all but his earliest memories, and he seems unable to form new long-term ones, losing each day as it passes. He assembles allies (some of them, such as Hegisistratus and Pindaros, actual historical figures) and attempts to follow the words of the oracle at Delphi in order to placate the gods, gain his memory back, and be reunited with his friends. Along the way, he seems blessed or cursed with the ability to see the gods, and, soon enough, he learns that his touch can make these mystical figures visible to others.

Of the Latro books, Nicholas Gevers states:

Wolfe uses the narrator's damaged memory to create the same kind of instability that peppers some of his other texts, though this time it is ostensibly an injury which destabilizes the narrative. The novel begins after the historical campaigns of Plataea and

Salamis in the Greco-Roman wars, and this dependence on Herodotus, the first history, is never abandoned.

Soldier of the Mist is, then, an inconclusive and ambiguous text. This quality pervades its form, its characterizations and descriptions, its themes and conclusions. Latro is representative of all searchers for truth and identity; he searches within himself by writing his scroll, he searches outside himself by consulting the gods and the natural world they symbolize. Wolfe reveals the pitfalls of the quest, internal and external: the shortcomings of reflection, character, and memory, the deceit and unquantifiability of a world too complex, too vast, too mysterious for ordinary comprehension. That these obstructions exist on so many levels, textual, mythic, poetic, and thematic, is the measure of Wolfe's mature art. *Soldier of the Mist* is a fragment of a longer work, but its very inconclusiveness reflects the unending ambiguity of Wolfe's universe of veiling obscurities and tantalizing darknesses. (Gevers 195)

Before offering my own exegesis, restating Peter Wright's assessment of the Latro cycle. He reads it as a direct response to Wolfe's most famous series, *The Book of the New Sun*, in which the narrator Severian, an ex-torturer cast out of his guild for mercy in a post-history environment of decay, exhibits a perfect memory and eventually brings a new sun to the dying "Urth" he inhabits. One of the key moments of the Latro volumes involves the main character's encounter with another historical figure famous for his memory: Simonides, whose mnemonic system involved the creation of a memory palace to aid in recollection. Throughout the entire cycle, the relationship between the gods, their worshippers, and Latro is emphasized strongly. In *Attending Daedalus*, Peter Wright claims:

The precise nature of these [divine] encounters is not, however, readily apparent, not least because Wolfe realises [sic] that every god had ‘a name suitable for the tongue of each nation’ (*S. Mist*, p. 23), and employs this multitude of names and epithets to refer to any one god or goddess. Accordingly, Dionysis [sic] becomes ‘the king of Nysa’, ‘the God in the Tree’ and ‘the Kid’ (*S. Mist*, p. 23). Zeus is referred to as ‘the Thunderer’ (*S. Mist*, p. 33), and Persephone is presented as Kore, or ‘the Maiden’ (*S. Mist*, p. 146). While this kind of multiple denomination is explained in the text as an effort towards historical veracity, Wolfe’s strategy also deconstructs the reader’s familiarity with the Greek world. This deconstruction is extended by the employment of a Roman first-person narrator who writes no Greek and who mistranslates many Greek nouns according to their phonetic similarities to other words. In Latro’s scroll, Spartans become ‘rope-makers’ as he confuses Sparta with σπάρταν, the Greek word for a rope or cable. Similarly, the town of Eleusis is mistaken for ἀλευσις, meaning the advent of the Lord, and named Advent, while Platæa is termed Clay as Latro fails to distinguish between Πλάταια and πλαστάς, meaning something moulded in clay or wax. (Wright, *Attending Daedalus* 187)

Wright goes on to discuss how the critic and author Algis Budrys saw this process as a demythologizing one, while Wright himself views it as one which instead defamiliarizes the reader with the Classical period. While at first this may be an extra veneer of separation from our understanding of the gods and historical forces at work in Latro’s story, historical markers and Wolfe’s clear dedication to Herodotus suggest exactly where to look for aid in piecing together the fragments of Latro’s memories. Wright’s entire analysis of the Latro series treats it as a metacommentary on *The Book of the New Sun*. Of special interest to this chapter’s examination of the text is the manner in which Wright employs Latro’s memory palace. Before getting to this

point, Wright notes that both accounts are supposedly translations from historical records, one of the ancient past and one which has somehow survived “futuraity.”

Where Severian’s memoir comes to Wolfe, in his guise as editor, along the fictional corridors of Time, he receives Latro’s dislocated notations, more feasibly, from a ‘Mr. D_____ A_____ ... a dealer and collector in Detroit [who] knowing my interest in dead languages ... asked me to provide [a] translation’ after a number of Latro’s scrolls were ‘found behind a collection of Roman lyres in the basement of the British Museum’ (*S. Mist*, p. xi). It seems probable here that Wolfe is punning on ‘lyre’ and ‘liar’, self-consciously acknowledging the falseness of his claim for the scroll’s veracity and Latro’s unreliability: Latro is, albeit unwittingly, a Roman liar. (188)

Here we can begin to see the poor punning that characterizes so much Wolfe analysis.⁵ Wright claims that Wolfe’s translation emphasizes the inherent fictionality of the narrative and also endows it with “ironic pseudo-veracity” (188). He also notes that these explicit mistranslations and substitutions by the translator Wolfe “[draw] attention to the gap between the signifier and what is signified to show how the diction of each text is ‘suggestive rather than definitive’” (188). After examining similarities between the cast peopling both texts, Wright emphasizes that both Latro and Severian are exiles. The most important claim, and one certainly worth considering, is that both characters serve a very particular purpose in their worlds, though Wright ultimately understates exactly how much agency Latro has:

⁵ The worst offender in this remains Robert Borski’s analysis of the short story “Cues,” a Faustian bargain a cartoonist makes with an alien who looks like a bowling ball, found in *The Long and the Short of It*. Borski transforms this into a delusional man catching VD from a toilet seat, somehow. Wolfe does occasionally create palimpsests, but these are exactly the kind of interpretations Adam Roberts railed against in claiming that Wolfe has more to fear from his fans than his detractors.

In time, Severian and Latro become conciliators. As Severian reconciles the Hierogrammates with humanity by securing the success of the former's evolutionary plans, so Latro, somewhat more modestly, makes the gods and goddesses who appear to him manifest to others simply by touching them [...]. In each case, the character forms a bridge between the natural and supranatural worlds. (Wright 189)

Wright makes note of the inversion between Severian's perfect memory and Latro's damaged one, but also claims that the protagonists accomplish a very similar task within the context of each series. He even goes so far as to suggest that Latro's lack of memory is a commentary on Severian and the veracity of his narrative, and that Latro's true purpose as a literary character is to undermine Severian's credibility:

In *Soldier of the Mist*, Wolfe refutes the reader's trust in the accuracy of first-person accounts by allowing the reader to understand more than the protagonist. Unlike Latro, who neglects to reread his scroll, and thereby misinterprets the political and social situations he encounters, the reader is capable of recalling the incidents that Latro has recorded. As the fantasy writer and reviewer Craig Shaw Gardner observes, 'When a serpent-demon possesses the body of a necromancer ... Latro perceives the necromancer's true nature immediately, but forgets it over and over again. Of course, we remember it.'

In *Soldier of the Mist*, the fictional 'I' is never assimilated into the actual 'I' because of this asymmetrical distribution of knowledge. As Killheffer remarks, Latro 'can only read as we read, and while this brings us closer to him in one sense, it prevents the same kind of understanding and identification [found] in *The Book of the New Sun*'. By retarding the kind of intimate reader-character relationship found in Severian's account, Wolfe

encourages the reader to view Latro's observations objectively and then apply that objectivism to The Urth Cycle. (Wright, *Attending Daedalus* 190)

Wright claims that Latro's simple ability to draw conclusions without the extensive extra philosophical information and complexity of Severian's reality actually reflects on how spurious those conclusions are. He also asserts that the references in the Latro novels, positioned in history as they are, are innately different and less digressive since they are grounded in history.

Of course, treating Latro as a commentary on a previous book cycle neglects to treat each of the series as self-contained separate mimetic realities which have nothing to do with one another, though the preoccupations with memory and reconciliation certainly link them thematically. In addition, Wright's claim that the allusions and references in *The Book of the New Sun* are innately different than those in the Latro books really does seem like a case of confirmation bias. The last and most important consideration of Wright's approach to the Latro books for our own discussion of the text and Latro's identity involves how he tackles the symbolism of the memory palace Simonides introduces to Latro:

When Simonides learns of Latro's amnesia, he resolves to give him 'a lesson in the art of memory' (*S. Arete*, p. 225) in an attempt to alleviate some of Latro's difficulties. During this lesson, Simonides instructs Latro to erect a large 'memory palace' in his mind, to imagine its location, and the very stones of its walls, in absolute detail:

'Now you must lay your foundation ... Then you're ready to lay the floor. It must be of smooth marble, white, but veined brown and black. Into each slab some glyph has been cut, and no glyph is like any other ... Look back at your palace. It's very high, isn't it? It was, with a hundred lofty arches and airy galleries, and course on course of pillars, each towering colonnade thrusting a hundred carved capital above the last ...

‘What do you see ... before you?’

An avenue lined with statues.

‘What are the statues? Describe them.’ Lions with the faces of men.

‘No, only the one nearest you is a lion with a man’s face—that’s what’s deceived you ...

Describe the statue facing the one you’ve already described.’

A winged lion, with the head and breasts of a woman ...

‘Look back now at the lion with a man’s face. Study it carefully. It shall be the conservator of your name. The stone is soft. Take out your knife and carve your name ... in the right foreleg of this statue.’ (S. Arete, pp. 226–30)

While this sequence identifies Latro with the sphinx, thereby implying that his life and his narrative are a riddle to be solved through interpretation, Latro’s meeting with Simonides allows Wolfe to provide the reader with the principles of the Classical art of memory. Using Simonides’s lesson, Wolfe illustrates how the ancients believed that the memory could be artificially enhanced by imagining a series of locations (in Latro’s case the floor slabs and statues of his palace) on which mnemonic images or memory prompts could be inscribed.

... By situating the palace in an arid land where it is flanked by the rising and setting sun, Wolfe emphasises [sic] the importance of an image of the sun to Latro’s memory system. In fact, Wolfe makes a considerable effort to draw the reader’s attention to the presence of the sun by compressing time until Latro witnesses both sunrise and sunset in a matter of moments. The diurnal arc described by the sun as Latro looks south not only symbolises [sic] his day-long memory but also represents how his memory palace exists, quite literally, under the sun.

For Wolfe, a writer with an undeniable penchant for metaphor and symbol and renown for linguistic puns, such a location is unlikely to be coincidental. Indeed, by positioning the building under the sun he seems to be directing the reader, albeit elliptically, to the existence of the similar system implicit within, that is metaphorically 'lying beneath', the structure of Severian's narrative. (193-5)

Wright stops just short of claiming that the relationship between Severian's memory and Latro's memory palace are explicit, but he is quick to associate the solar imagery of the sun above with the religious figure of the New Sun whose faith bears a prominent position in *The Book of the New Sun*. Wright even subjugates the prophecy of Apollo Latro hears to an entirely different series:

Such a reading seems to be entirely in keeping with Wolfe's desires, as the advice Latro receives from Apollo shortly after the battle of Platæa suggests. 'Look beneath the sun' (*S. Mist*, p. 16), the god counsels, an instruction Pindaros believes to indicate 'that the light of understanding [will come] from' Apollo (*S. Mist*, p. 16). The god's words, and Pindaros's interpretation, not only allude to the guidance that Apollo could offer Latro during his quest but also represent important recommendations to the reader of *The Urth Cycle*. (196)

Wright sees this as further evidence of the pawn-like nature of both characters, manipulated by forces who are almost off the page but who show up from time to time amidst mystery and confusion. It is this idea of a totally determined pawn that makes Wright's overall approach to Wolfe so explicitly anti-Catholic. Catholicism is a faith free from Calvinist doctrines of double-predestination, emphasizing free will as one of the most important features of human existence.

Wright scoffs at the idea that any of the protagonists in a Wolfe story might exhibit features of choice, as we shall see later.

Into these complex worlds, Wolfe introduces narrators who become inextricably entangled in the machinations of political groups and non-human entities who manipulate them for their own purposes. In contrast to Severian's recruitment by the otherworldly forces that shape human destiny, which has passed largely unacknowledged by critics, Latro's enlistment has been reported in a number of reviews. Robert Reilly, for example, notes how Latro 'is the focal point for a struggle between Cynthia and Gaea, constantly manipulated by the men and women around him, who want to use his heroic military capabilities to advance their own ends'. Blackford agrees: 'Latro and his companions are pawns in the politics of the Greek city states and their northern neighbours [sic] in the turmoil of the Persian war. At a deeper level, however, they are also the playthings of the gods.'

It is surprising that no critic has remarked how Latro's exploitation by Demeter and the Triple Goddess is a duplication of Severian's employment by the Hierogrammates, particularly when Wolfe makes considerable efforts to identify Latro with Severian, and the Greek gods with the governors of his cosmos. Indeed, Wolfe facilitates the comparison between Classical deity and myth-making alien further by demonstrating how the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece can manifest themselves in a number of different aspects or guises: like the Hierogrammates, they are, in a sense, metamorphs or shape-shifters. [...]

Clearly, the Greek gods and the Hierogrammates both play games with humanity to satisfy their desires. For Demeter and Diana, Latro is a pawn in a feud over land and

worship; for the Hierogrammates, Severian is the key actor in the masquerade that enables them to obviate a rebellion on Urth. (Wright, *Attending Daedalus* 196-7)

Such a lengthy look at other critical positions will prove unnecessary in most of our other discussions, but it is important to see how uniformly bleak the world view of Wolfe's critics can be, completely ignoring the religious allegiances Wolfe openly proclaims. I would like to preface my own discussion of the *Latro* books, which emphasizes that they are arguing for a kind of universal symbolism, with a creed repeated yearly during the Christmas season in Catholic mass. Midnight Masses in the Catholic Church typically begin with these words:

The Twenty-fifth Day of December, when ages beyond number had run their course from the creation of the world, when God in the beginning created heaven and earth, and formed man in his own likeness; when century upon century had passed since the Almighty set his bow in the clouds after the Great Flood, as a sign of covenant and peace; in the twenty-first century since Abraham, our father in faith, came out of Ur of the Chaldees; in the thirteenth century since the People of Israel were led by Moses in the Exodus from Egypt; around the thousandth year since David was anointed King; in the sixty-fifth week of the prophecy of Daniel; in the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad; in the year seven hundred and fifty-two since the foundation of the City of Rome; in the forty-second year of the reign of Caesar Octavian Augustus, the whole world being at peace, JESUS CHRIST, eternal God and Son of the eternal Father, desiring to consecrate the world by his most loving presence, was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and when nine months had passed since his conception, was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem of Judah, and was made man: The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ

according to the flesh. (“The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the Roman Martyrology”)

Identifying himself as a “practicing” Catholic, Gene Wolfe has attended mass and participated in Communion regularly, and, assuming that he has often gone to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, he has heard the words above with minor variations for decades, spoken in a chanting voice which seems to posit a causal relationship between the *Pax Romana* and the coming of Christ: at a sufficiently civilized state to achieve peace, humanity was at last globally prepared for divine redemption. While different Christian faiths may or may not ascribe to this “condition” of Christ’s appearance, it is one of the few reasons that might be offered when some curious querent asks, “Why, after all this time, and all the noble souls sent to Sheoul or Limbo in perpetuity, has the Redeemer come at last?” In Wolfe’s books of the Roman mercenary Latro, the gods act in several ways: as individuals, as focal points of reverence, and as sentient symbols manifesting certain objects or philosophies active in the world. Many of the gods display two (or more) natures throughout the course of Latro’s narrative, which we shall generalize as fluctuating between chthonic and empyreal aspects: The Virgin Huntress seems a more auspicious ally than the Dark Mother; Kore’s young visage contrasts with her putrescent, rotting back; and Cybele treats Latro with more kindness than the blood-thirsty, child-consuming Earth Mother. Perhaps the gods can change. Indeed, Wolfe suggests a shift in the strife-filled pagan world towards peace, as expressed in a poem the narrator recites to prove that he is in fact a Hellene at the end of the second volume, an adaptation of Pindar’s first “Pythian Ode”:

You quench the bolt, the lightning’s fearful fire,
The eagle rests his wings, that never tire;
To hear you shaken by your song,

Fell Ares quits the spear-proud throng. (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 602-3)

Though the amnesiac Roman Latro does not consciously realize it, he is an essential part of the mythical system of his pagan world, and his presence in ancient Greece serves multiple purposes. One of them hints at the rise of a new world order under Rome, as Greece falls from its prominence. The power of Rome, perennially symbolized by the eagle, will take its traditions and religious beliefs from Greece and create an order where the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine can bring Christianity to Europe in one fell swoop.

For the Peace of Rome to become a reality, humanity had to subjugate the world with sword and fire, the tools of war, personified as Ares or Mars, in the hope that one day the sword could be cast aside forever under a unified humanity. The Persian conflicts recorded by Herodotus, during which Latro's journeys are set, ultimately resulted in something like a Greek Enlightenment, but only after the scattered and disunited Greeks, against all odds, triumphed over Persia and its "Great King," Xerxes.

Beyond the historical underpinnings of the novels, Latro's path follows an ancient tradition tracing the center of power from Persia to Greece and then to Rome before eventually being taken up (at least according to some English poets in imitation of Virgil and the *translatio imperii*) by England. This moving center of power might be illustrated in Latro's shifting allegiance. The story is one of a Roman who leaves the Great King's Army to serve Greece, ultimately focused on his homeward journey towards Rome, until his journal is eventually translated into English in the modern era. The syncretism on display concerning the religious systems of these various peoples begins to show much the same shift; the Zoroastrian faith of the Persians was one of the oldest monotheistic religions in the world, and we see it clashing and synthesizing with several other philosophies over the course of Latro's scrolls. The Greek slaves

of the Spartans worship the Great Mother, Gaea, but the Spartans themselves glorify the Huntress and the Moon, while the people of Athens obviously reverence Athena (who has less of a role in the conflict than the other “two” Greek female deities involved). While these disparate female principles struggle for dominance, the masculine gods are surprisingly hard to see in the text, though we are reminded at the beginning and end of the first two volumes of Dionysus and Pan, who even appears in the introduction aiding the Athenians at the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, a pivotal defeat for Darius of Persia before Xerxes came to power. The first *Latro* book provides the date 479 BCE for its opening action. The presence of Pan in the introduction reminds us of one final important literary and historical tradition: the tale of the Emperor Tiberius hearing a voice declaring the death of Pan, a clarion call signifying the symbolic end of paganism and, in some traditions, the death (and therefore triumph) of Christ, who assumed “all” true authority.

There is a key scene which occurs between *Latro* and the slave girl Io late in *Soldier of Arete* clarifying her impressions of the narrator and situating him at the heart of the divine struggle occurring both on and off stage. During their journey to Thrace to retrieve both the engineer Oeobazus for Athens and the Horses of the Sun for the Amazons, Io tells her master that even though the mantis Hegisistratus (a historical Greek advisor of the Persian general Mardonius, in whose service *Latro* begins his journal) and the Amazon Queen Hippephode have been making the decisions for their group:

“[Y]ou’re the one who really ought to. ... [I]t’s not any of them that the Thracians are afraid of. It’s you. I was in back of you this morning with my sword, and I could see their faces. Polos says they call you ‘the hero,’ and it means Pleistorus [the Thracian Ares] is inside you even if you don’t know it. ... You see the gods sometimes, master. You really

do. Once you saw the King of Nysa and touched him, and then I could see him, too. He was old, and he looked like the black man – but ... [...] One time before the Shining God gave me to you, I went to the theater back in Hill. It costs a lot, but sometimes a rich man will buy seats for poor people, and that time my old master did and let us in first. The actors wore masks, but the people in the play didn't know.” (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 448)

Io's words strongly imply that Pleistorus, also known as Ares or Mars, is actually somehow inside Latro, and that the characters of the novel are re-enacting a drama unaware of the masks they wear and the roles they play. The very start of the novel presents the idea that people (and perhaps beings beyond the merely human) should be addressed by the role they are serving at the time. A priest of Dionysus introduces this concept when he speaks to Io, even tying it in to the nature of the gods and their dominion in the ancient world:

“He is a potter, we will say. He is also the father of a daughter much like yourself, the husband of such a woman as you shall be, and the son of another. When our men march to war, he takes up his helmet, his hoplon, and his spear; he is a shieldman. Now answer this riddle for me. Which is he? Shieldman, son, husband, father, or potter? ... Then how will you address him when you speak to him? Assuming you do not know his name? ... You will address him according to the place in which you and he find yourselves and the need you have for him, will you not? If you meet him on the drill field, you will say, 'Shieldman.' In his shop, you will say, 'Potter, how much for this dish?'

“You see, my dear, there are many gods, but not so many as ignorant people suppose. So with your goddess, whom you call the Lady of the Swine. When we wish her to bless our fields, we call her the Grain Goddess. But when we think of her as the mother of all the

things that spring from the soil, trees as well as barley, wild beast as well as tame, Great Mother.” (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 39)

Similarly, Latro goes by a name which denotes his role at the time of his service to Persia: a mercenary or brigand. Only in the very final scene of the first volume do readers learn Latro’s name, from a dying Roman soldier who recognizes his comrade on the field of battle: “I found him beside the broken eagle. He wore a lion’s skin, but a spear had divided his thigh and a dagger had pierced his corselet of bronze scales. The lion was dying. ‘Lucius...’ He used my own speech. ‘Lucius, is it really you?’” (315). Learning Latro’s name on the final page displays another structural parallel between the first two books: the final words of *Soldier of Arete* reveal a divine name that might be equally applicable. Pindaros writes on Latro’s scroll:

As for this poor servant of the Shining One, the patron of the muses, he and his slave will return to their own seven-gated city [Thebes] – or perhaps journey to far-distant Sicily, rich in flocks, as the grave emissaries of glorious Hieron, splendid in victory, importune. If that be so, he prays the blessing of Ino, white keeper of the chambers of the sea among the daughters of Nereus. Permit us to voyage in safety, O lovely Ino, to that great city, Syracuse, the precinct of Ares. (623)

As the final words of the book assert, the city of Syracuse in Sicily, which seems to be where Latro was headed, is the precinct of Ares, and it might be prudent to infer that the priest’s speech at the start of the series refers specifically to our main character: when he fights among men away from his home, he is called Latro; when he comes across human friends and comrades from Italy, he is Lucius; if there is any trace of divinity in him, as we hope to establish, he should be called Ares, though the characterization of the God of War in Wolfe’s series does not match the classical Greek model of a blood-thirsty and violent savage.

The Roman cognate of Ares, Mars, features far more positively in Latin stories as the father of Romulus and Remus. The boorish and chaotic struggles instigated by Ares in Greek myth transform into the noble and ordering force of the Roman Mars. One of the final assessments of the character of Ares, given on the last page of Latro's writing in *Soldier of Arete*, before Pindaros provides closure in describing Latro's triumphant escape, provides an overwhelmingly disciplined and stoic figure closer to classical depictions of the Roman God of War:

“War isn't all blood and death, lad. And it isn't always the biggest army that wins. Pretty often it's the one that drills the best, and keeps its armor clean, and stands up best to long marches on short rations. Old Ares isn't some kind of monster, see? Think of him as a plain man that wants to win the war and get back home to Aphrodite. He's for training, discipline, and fair play with the men. And he whistles when he loses just like he whistles when he wins.” (620)

The syncretic approach Wolfe takes to his gods and goddesses incorporates an almost Egyptian divine fluidity, in accordance with his primary sources, such as Plutarch and Herodotus, and Ares' indifference to triumph and defeat will eventually even achieve a Christian resonance. As Herodotus (to whom *Soldier of the Mist* is dedicated) notes:

The names of almost all the gods also came to Greece from Egypt. My enquiries led me to discover that they are non-Greek in origin, but it is my belief that they came largely from Egypt. With the exception of Poseidon and the Dioscuri ... and also Hera, Hestia, Themis, the Graces, and the Nereids, all the gods and their names have always been found in the country of Egypt. Here I am repeating what the Egyptians themselves say. As for the gods whose names they told me they do not recognize, I think that they were

given their names by the Pelasgians. [...] The Egyptians do not have hero-cults, however.
[...]

It was only yesterday or the day before, so to speak, that the Greeks came to know the provenance of each of the gods, and whether they have all existed for ever, and what they each look like. After all, I think that Hesiod and Homer lived no more than four hundred years before my time, and they were the ones who created the gods' family trees for the Greek world, gave them their names, assigned them their honours [sic] and areas of expertise, and told us what they looked like. Any poets who are supposed to have lived before Homer and Hesiod actually came after them in my opinion. (Herodotus 116-7)

It is worth noting that Latro's memory palace, inspired by the physical association of certain thoughts with material objects, also contains some Egyptian (and Christian) imagery, despite Wright's reductive extra-textual explanation. At one point, when Latro learns that enraged soldiers from Kemet haunt Corinth, he cuts the name Kemet "across the chest of the hawk-headed man" in his memory palace (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 530). Kemet means "land of the black soil" in Egypt; usually the usurper Set is known as "lord of the black soil" in opposition to falcon- or hawk-headed Horus, who controlled more fertile lands. In Wolfe's book, Kemet refers to Egypt as a whole, however. That hawk-headed figure in Latro's palace represents the War God Horus in Egypt. When Latro seeks entrance to the Pythian Games (similar to the Olympic Games and held at Delphi ever four years), his chief rival, the Spartan runner Pasicrates, denies that Latro is a Hellene, but Latro's Egyptian mental images help him recall that he is in fact qualified to participate: "The palace rose before me, tier upon tier. Frantically I hurried from image to image – a man with the head of a crocodile, another with that of a hawk" (602). This prompts him to remember the vital verse taken from Pindar in which Ares quits the spear-proud

throng, proving himself in the process. The crocodile-headed figure is Sobek of the Nile, an ambiguous, apotropaic water and battle god who eventually became associated with Horus and was assimilated into the triad of Osiris, Isis, and Horus. Horus, interestingly, is the falcon- or hawk-headed god of war in Egypt. Thus, both Sobek and Horus, when transposed into Greek culture, become Ares, though Horus remains one of the central figures in Egyptian mythology (Bresciani 199-202). If the War God, too, has chthonic and empyreal natures, Horus would be the transcendent empyreal one, contrasted against Sobek's apotropaic and demanding nature. The Spartans, who are noted in the text as the most warlike people on earth, might be strengthening the chthonic qualities of the personification of war through their behavior, and their most visible representative in Latro's story, Pasicrates, exemplifies both their discipline and their cruel excess.

The manly virtues Latro embodies resonate strongly with the God of War, who goes by many names, including Pleistorus. At one point the engineer Oeobazus (a historical person sacrificed to Ares who actually escapes death in Wolfe's book by assuming a different identity) reveals that he once ran across a tribe "who believe that the War God's none other than Ahura Mazda - Ahura Mazda incognito, as it were" (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 472). The glossary of the first volume lists Ahura Mazda as, "Literally, Wise God or Wise Lord; the chief force for good in a mythology in which evil occupies an equal place" (625). Traditional Zoroastrian reverence for Ahura Mazda associates him with light and fire – just as Latro's true name, Lucius, means "light." During the Achaemenid Persian era, which lasted from 550-330 BCE, the only representation of Ahura Mazda was found in the custom of every emperor keeping an empty chariot drawn by white horses, so that Ahura Mazda could accompany the Persian army in war (Boyce). Before Latro takes back the white Horses of the Sun in *Soldier of Arete*, the Great

Mother invites him to stand upon a silver chariot, and he acknowledges that he has ridden such a vehicle before (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 433). One of the symbols of Ares is also a chariot, though drawn by four fiery steeds. In many ways, the Soldier series involves synthesizing all of these divine symbols, whether they be chariots, wolves, or lions, into a unified pattern.

What are the implications of Latro's identification with Pleistorus and the mixing of pagan symbols between the Greek and the monotheistic Persian belief systems? What would it entail for the world if that powerful Persian god of goodness, the closest thing to the Judeo-Christian God the pagan world has, learns what it is to be truly human? As mentioned above, one of Wolfe's only historical changes in the series involves having a character sacrificed to Ares in history actually survive. The subtext of the first two volumes implies that mercy and order have come to War at last from his first-hand experiences as a human being who suffers the horrors of war and violence. The animal symbol of both Italy and Mars is the wolf, and the course of history begun in the Soldier books allows us to see that Latro signifies much more than an amnesiac Roman mercenary – what he learns through pain and conflict might eventually teach the pagan gods that same mercy. While the Great Mother's lions and wolves clearly manifest themselves in Latro's journals, the Roman War God eventually appropriates those images to a more masculine end. We already see the lion as a prominent symbol of Pleistorus in Thrace in the second volume, and Latro's Roman identity heavily implies that he is also associated with the wolf through Mars and his children. Beyond a newfound syncretic peace, the theological implications of Rome's rise to power would eventually allow Christianity to conquer Europe, when the secular might of an Emperor brought theological unity to the many disparate pagan elements under his purview. While some might claim that the story of salvation and Christ's life are based on earlier myths, perhaps Wolfe's theological aim in the Soldier series was to explore

how all of those earlier myths and religions prefigure and contribute to the coming of true tranquility and salvation as they collapse into a unified, monotheistic design predicated on mercy, justice, and love, when the time for war is finished at last. Unlike Gevers' claim that there is no absolute truth, in which the relativistic nature of belief systems multiplies across civilizations, incompatible and destructive to the concept of Truth, Wolfe actually manages to subsume all of these disparate religions into one master plot, reconciling their symbols to point towards the key moment in history from a Christian perspective.

Above, we saw how Wright argued that Latro's memory palace linked him to Severian in a completely unrelated series of books. This is a serious failure to confront the complex historical symbolism that Wolfe employs to ground the Soldier series, for the memory palace is also steeped in explicitly Christian gospel imagery. Latro imagines starting the building of his memory palace where the desert begins. To the north he sees desert of yellow and red stone, to the east are rocky hills punctuated by the rising sun, to the south lies yellow sand and a man with three camels in the distance, and to the west "fields of barley and millet, and the mud huts of peasants. Beyond is the river and beyond the river the setting sun" (517). Latro sees four huts with people who till the field living in them, and Simonides says that they might meet some of those people soon. Simonides instructs him how to build his foundation and floor, of smooth marble, with glyphs cut into each slab. Latro walks west to a wide river, where there is only black mud. At his palace, he sees pillars, "each towering colonnade thrusting a hundred carved capitals above the last" (519). He also sees fields of grain and statues which appear to be lions with the face of men, as described above.

Latro conceptualizes the nearest figure as "a winged lion, with the head and breasts of a woman" (519). Behind this lies "a winged bull with the head of a bearded man. Facing it across

the avenue stood the image of a powerful man with the head of a bull” (519). Latro wonders how he can even hear the ghostly presence of Simonides, noting that the poet seems to be, unlike Latro and his palace, “north of the sea. I decided that he was surely dead now, and it was only his ghost I heard, somehow separated from his tomb and searching for it” (519). Here, amidst the Greek and Egyptian symbols of the pagan world, Wolfe has introduced imagery which is explicitly Christian, though most readers will not be looking for it. The winged lion is traditionally a symbol of St. Mark, and St. Luke is similarly portrayed by a winged bull or ox. The presence of both of these, with three camels approaching from the south, strongly suggests the birth of Christ. In Christian iconography, the three magi seeking out the Christ child at his birth, usually identified as Zoroastrian Persians, are almost always associated with camels. While at first the setting of Latro’s memory palace might seem like Egypt, Jerusalem and Bethlehem are south of Athens, and Simonides would have been dead over four centuries by the time of Christ’s birth. The golden sparks which Latro equates with his own childhood are here related to the divine birth of the Muses, and Latro’s memory palace represents another combination of the divine and the mortal in the birth of Christ. To the east, where the sun rises, is the metaphorical past, with its barren pagan desert, and to the west the future, where fecund fields and the four huts, populated by peasants who till and care for the land, produce a more fertile environment, clearly representing the four gospels. By now the implication of Pleistorus’ equation with Ahura Mazda should be clear, as well as the relationship of Latro’s story with the chant proclaiming the Nativity of Christ which I introduced earlier. This sublime and symbolic synthesis typifies Wolfe’s ability as a writer: the winged lion can at one and the same time be Gaea, the Sphinx, and St. Mark, whose name means “dedicated to Mars or war,” a concept which has been successfully personified in Latro, and each of those significations are entirely true and valid for

the text. The symbol of John, who presents a vision of Christ in keeping with his ascendant and divine nature while also identifying Christ as the Word of God or the Logos, is the Eagle, and Latro is intrinsically related to this symbol through his Roman heritage. Those four peasant huts tilling the field are still centuries in the future, but the redemption of all of these pagan images is surely imminent. Even though Simonides implies that they might meet these figures soon, readers should not expect that they will actually appear within Latro's narrative at any point, as they are theological and historical figures.

Simonides also tells Latro that the man-faced lion will be the "conservator" of his name and instructs him to carve the name Latro in its right foreleg. The winged lion spreads her wings and says, "Surely you know *me*, Latro I am your mother, and your mother's mother. For me and by me you stole the horses of the sun, that they might be returned to him. I am she who asks what walks upon four legs at sunrise, upon two at noon, and upon three at evening. And all who cannot answer me, at evening die" (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 520). This combination of Cybele and the Sphinx also collapses a few generations of Greek deities into one, but Cybele's relationship to Gaea and Rhea can in some way explain how she can be mother and grandmother to Latro at the same time: Gaea's daughter Rhea gave birth to Zeus, and Zeus's sister Hera bore him Ares. Alas, the Triple Goddess who seems to be the daughter of Gaea in Wolfe's book has multiple paternities, muddling the generational distinctions even further. It is almost easier to make Latro fill the traditional role of Zeus here, as he would be the grandson of Gaea and the son of Rhea, though Hera and Rhea are also definitely combined in this scheme, which would also make some sense of conflating Ahura Mazda into the Greek pantheon. Neither Gevers nor Wright confront these divine details of Latro's memory palace, choosing to ignore them. They

also disregard the fact that Latro is called Pleistorus directly, the Thracian cognate of Ares, who is said to be Ahura Mazda in disguise in the text.

Returning to the riddle of the Sphinx, Latro answers that it is a traveler, who begins his journey on horse, walks for himself, and then, being footsore, relies upon a staff. She notes that it is “a good reply,” even though he lacks “the advantage of lameness” that Swollenfoot [Oedipus] had (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 522). Gaea tells Latro that she does not devour those who understand her question. “Isn’t your traveler upon the journey of life? Say yes, or I’ll devour you at the end of your days” (524). Latro poignantly responds, “[I]n the morning of life ... a young man goes forth as though mounted, because he is carried upon the shoulders of his parents. By midday their support has vanished, and he must walk for himself. In the evening of life, he can hold up his head only because he is supported by the memory what once he was” (524-5). This final statement is illustrated dramatically:

As I spoke the final word, Gaea’s vast wings roared behind me and I felt a wind as violent as a storm at sea; by the time I turned, she was already very far above me. Higher she rose, and higher still as I watched openmouthed, until she was little more than a dark speck against the overarching azure dome, and I felt certain she would soon disappear into the cloudless sky. But at last she settled upon a cornice of the topmost battlement, where she remained motionless and appeared to have become again a mere figure carved from the reddish stone. (525)

To emphasize this symbolic flight, Latro speaks of how a man is only supported by the memory of what he once was, a memory that he does not have, and the Sphinx ascends to the heavens portentously, before returning to her element and becoming a part of his memory palace, strongly suggesting that perhaps the memory that would sustain Latro is far more transcendent than he

can recall – both celestial and divine. After this, he notes that the rooms of his palace are filled only with “light and air” (525). He sees an urn with capering satyrs and a beetle rolling a golden sun; he wonders why the Sphinx deserts him as he is about to enter the palace. This scarab beetle rolling the golden sun shall appear in *Soldier of Sidon*, and the urn shall be sacrificed to Apollo with both of Latro’s scrolls inside it at the Pythian Games, preserving his memories for the future. It is here that Latro learns his most valuable lesson: the urn is a symbol of death, but it somehow serves to preserve his immortality. Though the Great Pan dies, something else is born into the world that might promise the defeat of death. Death is transformed into its opposite, eternal life, and the importance of the urn made transcendently clear.

Latro’s identity as the embodiment of manly virtue, *arete*, is essentially tied to the terrible experiences he has throughout the books. By the end of the second volume, Latro’s spirit for combat has vanished, and he even considers throwing himself from a cliff. The causes of Latro’s melancholy include the death of an Amazon lover, the abuse of the centaur Polos, and, most importantly, the slaughter of the Spartan slaves during a manumission ceremony in which the helots were promised their freedom – can a just or worthwhile world contain such violence and death? The massacre of the helot slaves by the Spartans and their entire approach to war might be affecting the avatar of a being whose entire purpose was once battle.

The mythical systems of various nations manifest themselves in Latro’s visions as he travels, giving the gods slightly different faces over time. While these gods are fluid, on the surface they do not quite attain the same homogeneity that Robert Graves introduces right at the start of *The Greek Myths*. His assessment of Neolithic European worship asserts:

Ancient Europe had no gods. The Great Goddess was regarded as immortal, changeless, and omnipotent; and the concept of fatherhood had not been introduced into religious

thought. She took lovers, but for pleasure, not to provide her children with a father. Men feared, adored, and obeyed the matriarch; the hearth which she tended in a cave or hut being their earliest social centre [sic], and motherhood their prime mystery. Thus the first victim of a Greek public sacrifice was always offered to Hestia of the Hearth. ... Not only the moon, but (to judge from Hemera of Greece and Grainne of Ireland) the sun, were the goddess's celestial symbols. In earlier Greek myth, however, the sun yields precedence to the moon – which inspires the greater superstitious fear, does not grow dimmer as the year wanes, and is credited with the power to grant or deny water to the fields.

The moon's three phases of new, full, and old recalled the matriarch's three phases of maiden, nymph (nubile woman), and crone. Then, since the sun's annual course similarly recalled the rise and decline of her physical powers – spring a maiden, summer a nymph, winter a crone – the goddess became identified with seasonal changes in animal and plant life; and thus with Mother Earth who, at the beginning of the vegetative year, produces only leaves and buds, then flowers and fruits, and at last ceases to bear. She could later be conceived as yet another triad: the maiden of the upper air, the nymph of the earth or sea, the crone of the underworld, typified respectively by Selene, Aphrodite, and Hecate.

These mystical analogues fostered the sacredness of the number three, and the Moon-goddess became enlarged to nine when each of the three persons – maiden, nymph, and crone, appeared in triad to demonstrate her divinity. Her devotees never quite forgot that there were not three goddesses, but one goddess; though, by Classical times, Arcadian Stymphalus was one of the few remaining shrines where they all bore the same name: Hera.

In the very last part of *Soldier of Arete*, when Latro reaches his most confused and lowest point, a strange misconception occurs to Latro: “Io taught me her name; I thought her my sister, but she is my lover” (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 583). If the name Io reminds Latro of the moon, she is of course associated with a sibling figure in the Triple Goddess – if it serves as “joy,” it also invokes the Egyptian Hathor, goddess of joy and feminine love, who became associated with Isis, and is therefore also intimately tied to both the mythological Io and Aphrodite. The complicated shifts in Egyptian mythology over time cast Horus as both brother and child of Isis. (These resonances do not suggest that Latro’s young girl has a divine nature – it might merely be her name which confuses Latro, whose memories have been subconsciously returning in the presence of the faun Aglaus in the second volume.)

Since Herodotus’s chronicle begins with the abduction of a woman named Io, it is worth a quick mention; the kidnaping eventually escalates to the conflict in Homer’s epic of the Trojan War. Interestingly, Herodotus chooses to begin from the point of view of the Persians, just as Latro starts his journey on their side. The passage below also reinforces why Latro calls the Phoenicians the Crimson Men in his narrative:

According to learned Persians, it was the Phoenicians who caused the conflict.

Originally, these people came to our sea from the Red Sea, as it is known. No sooner had they settled in the land they still inhabit than they turned to overseas travel. They sued to take Egyptian and Assyrian goods to various places, including Argos, which was at that time the most important state, in all respects, in the country which is now called Greece. Once, then, the Phoenicians came to Argos and began to dispose of their cargo. Five or six days after they had arrived, when they had sold almost everything, a number of women came down to the shore, including the king’s daughter, whose name (as the

Greeks agree too) was Io, the daughter of Inachus. These women were standing around the stern of the ship ... when the Phoenicians gave the word and suddenly charged at them. Most of the women got away, but Io and some others were captured. The Phoenicians took them on to their ship and sailed away for Egypt.

According to the Persians, that is how Io came to Egypt ... and that was the original crime. Later, some Greeks landed at Tyre in Phoenicia and abducted the king's daughter, Europa. ... [The Greeks] sailed in a longship to Aea in Colchis, to the Phasis River, and once they had completed the business that had brought them there, they abducted the king's daughter Medea [The Greeks responded to a demand to release Medea,] "*You* have never compensated us for your abduction of the Argive princess Io, so we will not make amends to you, either.

A generation later, the Persians say, Alexander [Paris] the son of Priam heard about this and decided to steal himself a wife from Greece. He was absolutely certain that he would get away with it, without incurring any penalty, since the earlier thefts had gone unpunished – and that is how he came to abduct Helen. (Herodotus 3-4)

The Greek response, to attack the Asian side of the conflict, poisoned Persia against them. The Phoenicians claim that Io came willingly after sleeping with the ship's captain at Argos and becoming pregnant, but since these details are not directly related to the conflict which ensued, they seem unimportant to Latro's narrative as well. As we can see from the quote above, the approach Herodotus takes to his historical account blends history, myth, and rumor, even tying the war with Persia into the oral tradition of Homer, and Wolfe seems to take much the same approach in forging Latro's story.

Wolfe's exploration of the evolving world at the beginning of history treats the pagan gods as a reality, which others can experience primarily through Latro's touch. Yet why can his touch make those gods visible to other mortals? We should keep in mind that even in the world of pagan myth, Gene Wolfe is still a mysteriously Catholic writer. The conflict in the background between the various gods and their agents, much as in Homer's *Iliad*, seems to be something that can be "won" or resolved, and the implication courses throughout the series, despite disunity and war, that the nature and reconciliation of those gods, to some degree, depends upon their worshippers. Both Gaea and the Triple Goddess manifest disturbingly violent and more nurturing aspects of themselves at different times in the text, indicating fluid personalities, though they are always somehow terrible. At one point, Latro sees Hades, who tells him, "I do not understand mercy, and thus I am as I am; but perhaps [Kore's mother Demeter] will be merciful to you, and I can learn from her. I hope she is at least just" (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 92). The words of Hades hint that the gods can learn from each other, and perhaps Latro's painful experiences with war and strife succeed in teaching him mercy at last.

To Latro and those around him, the pagan gods have a real existence. Readers who dismiss them as Latro's delusions have too many events to explain away: while his brain damage may add a layer of plausibility to the text, at its heart the novel takes the pagan pantheon seriously almost immediately, with the struggle of Persia and Greece no more important than the war of the gods raging in the background. The breach between the Triple Goddess Hecate or Tridotis (Moon, Huntress, and Dark Mother) and the Great Mother and her supporters and manifestations (including Hera, Gaea, Rhea, and Demeter as the Grain Goddess) influence the events of the novel. Though only implied in the text, the Great Mother's subjugation at the hands of a patriarchal Olympian system also plays out in the background. The distinction between

Hecate, her various manifestations, and her relationship to Demeter and Persephone is certainly complicated. Demeter and Persephone (or Kore) might be grouped together because of their significance in the true religious practices of the Greeks at Eleusis, the Eleusinian Mysteries (the myths of the gods can be considered as distinct from the actual religious practices of the Greeks – Latro confronts Kore at Eleusis in a vital scene). Aphrodite, when she makes love to Latro, reveals that she bears a grudge against Kore, but she also identifies the Triple Goddess as her rival. Are the forces allied with the Great Mother ones which stem from earthly, physical matter, like sex, the decaying bodies of the dead, and flora? That would make the Triple Goddess, distant and independent like the Moon, a figure of more abstract ideals or terrors, as her character changes from light to dark with the waxing and waning of her emblem. More likely, the rivalry actually splits three ways (perhaps echoing the competition of Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite for the Golden Apple of Discord which began the Trojan War). The reconciliation of the gods and their disparate elements might represent the possibility of a unity, perhaps even into the “Unseen God” whom a priest of Dionysus speaks of at the start of the series. However, even acknowledging that these powerful beings have a real existence and hold influence over the material world, they are discussed at times in a very monotheistic, almost angelic manner, as servants and lords of a far greater power operating off-screen (or even as the Ahuras and Daevas of Zoroastrian tradition.)

While Wolfe clearly pays homage to one of the fathers of history by setting Latro’s journey during Greece’s war with Persia, there might be a more symbolic reason that Latro first finds himself in the Persian army. Late in the first volume, we get a discussion of what these pagan gods might actually be: “Are you aware that [the Persians] hold there’s only a single god, whom they call Ahuramazda? [sic]”

Latro responds, “I know nothing of them, ... At least, nothing I can remember.”

“And yet they sacrifice to the sun, the moon, and the earth, and to fire and water. It is possible – I speak now as a sophist, sir – that there is but one god. It is possible also that there are many. But it is not possible that there are one *and* many. You disagree?”

Latro replies, “Sometimes a word is used for two things. When I loaded the regent’s mule, I tied the load with rope. ...”

“There’s good in the world, so there’s a good god, a wise lord. But there’s evil too, so there must be an evil lord as well. In fact, one posits the other. There can be no good without evil, no evil without good” (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 252). In this fashion, Latro’s story anticipates some of the theodicy of Christianity, which tries to justify the existence of evil given the reality of an all-powerful and benevolent God. In most traditional Catholic thinking (possibly distinct from strains of Calvinist pre-destination which might actually resonate with the world of antiquity more readily), without the potential for evil and disaster, choosing goodness and positive virtues is merely a sham. The possibility of evil must be real for good choices to signify anything.⁶ This exploration constitutes some of the sub-textual drama of Latro’s position, for as an amnesiac, he is not only easily manipulated, but he must often operate without the full context of any situation. Could such a man ever behave justly? Looking at Latro’s actions and the intentions behind them, it is accurate to perceive someone who, while devoted to battle and manly virtues, strives to be fair to those around him and to defend the weak and helpless – even lacking a full understanding of his true role in the world. Thus, when it seems that Latro might be called a pawn of forces greater than he can possibly understand, there is still the sense that his

⁶ Predestination and divine foreknowledge still exist as Catholic concepts, but on the day to day level, the Catholic Church emphasizes free will regarding good and evil individual actions.

actions make a difference. This direct examination of determinism and destiny creates yet another junction that differentiates Latro's story from much of the classical writing which so inspired it. Latro does not have the complete picture, just as those operating within a pagan system before the birth of Christ could never gain a sense of the redemptive philosophy of a Christian worldview. Even so, they could behave justly and honorably, regardless of the mores of their societies.

Latro continues the discussion above, challenging the idea that Ahura Mazda and his opposite, Angra Mainyu, must necessarily be binary opposites:

“Now I can speak for myself as well as for the magi. It doesn't seem to me that there can't be good without evil or evil without good. For a blind man, isn't it always night? With no day? It seemed to me that if Ahuramazda ... If Ahuramazda exists, Highness, all things serve him. The oak is his; so is the mouse that gnaws its root. ... But shouldn't he have servants greater than oaks and men? Surely he must, because the gap between Ahuramazda and men and oaks is very wide, and we see that every king has some minister whose authority's only slightly less than his own, and that such men have ministers of their own, similarly empowered. Besides, the existence of the sun, the moon, the earth, and of fire and water are indisputable facts.” (253)

The response Latro receives, in our day to day experience, is totally correct: “But the existence of Ahuramazda is not an indisputable fact” (253). This passage strongly suggests that the pagan gods are merely something like angels and heavenly servants beneath a more powerful Lord, though at times capable of truly earth-shattering majesty – not quite gods even while they exercise their power under that guise, as flawed human understanding identifies and worships them. This definitely challenges Nicholas Gevers' assertion that there is no absolute truth or

religious center operating in Latro's story: the pagan gods have been subverted to the ultimate manifestation of divine goodness. In the second volume, the engineer Oeobazus equates the War God and Ahura Mazda. As I have already mentioned, Latro even comes to be called by the name of that War God, Pleistorus in one of the climactic scenes of that book, in which he purges a giant boar from the palace at Cobrys. The villain of this scene, Prince Thamyris of Thrace, tells him, "You are called Pleistorus in this land By many other names in others" (488). This is complicated by an earlier conversation with the Great Mother in which, though Latro calls her mother, she identifies him as the offspring of fathers suckled by a wolf, which would make him a descendent of Mars rather than Mars himself (228). Luckily, there is some precedent in modern religions for a God being one with his Son.

When we follow the chain of identity from the missing Pleistorus in his temple to Ares, Mars, and finally to Ahura Mazda, we find ourselves knocking on the door of a figure who resembles conceptions of the monotheistic God of Judaism to a remarkable degree. There is only one thing that could make the personification of war quit "the spear-proud throng," and that is to experience its horror from the point of view of a mortal. Latro learns the pain of war, and it is then that Mars, whose symbol is of course the wolf that fed his children Romulus and Remus, giving birth to the grand city which would come to rule Europe and also promulgate Christianity after a change of heart, will have his own change of heart, and learn that war is suffering, dissipating the vengeful wrath of the father of the gods (and perhaps of that Old Testament God who seems temperamentally distinct from the all-loving and forgiving God of the New Testament) to learn genuine mercy and redemption at last.

The Spartan runner Pasicrates, in discussing the battle at Thermopylae in which three hundred Spartans (and many more servants) stood against the Persian invasion, identifies Latro's

role as one of a witness for the gods: “You’ll forget, but I’ve begun to think that’s because you’re the ear of the gods; they hear, instead of you, or they take the memory of what you’ve heard from you. This is something the gods should know” (273). Whether this is true or not (and there is little reason to doubt it), there is no denying that others can see the mystical world of myth at Latro’s touch – it becomes real when he interacts with it. There is equal evidence that in order for some of these gods to affect those around Latro, he must touch the mortals as well. Early in the books, a few exchanges make this clear.

The doomed helot sentry Cerdon tells Latro of his experience with the divine: “It was a god, and you saw him when none of the rest of us could. Then when you touched him, all of us could see him” (51). Cerdon’s own fate is soon at stake, when an apparition calling itself a Daughter of Enodia appears, asking Latro, “Won’t you give him to me?”

Latro asks, “Who am I . . . that I should say yes to you, or no?” (52). Perhaps readers should attempt to answer that question. The focal point of Latro’s touch proves that this exchange between the invisible spirit and the physical world runs in two directions, centered around our narrator: “If you only touch him, it may be enough to make him real” (52). In turn, Cerdon will soon beg Latro to touch the Great Mother so that the helots can drive the Rope Makers [their Spartan masters] away. This junction between the spiritual world of “divine” beings and transitory mortals might remind those familiar with Christian theology of the hypostatic union of the divine and the mortal, which will come to describe Christ’s dual nature. It is a middle ground conspicuously occupied by Latro.

The daughter of Enodia promises Latro a gift in return if he sacrifices Cerdon to her: “Touch him for me then, and I will go away. The fauns bring dreams, and should I meet one, I will order him to bring you the dream you wish” (53). Later, when Aglaus is present, this is

exactly what happens, as Latro has a pivotal dream at the end of the second volume which both reconciles him with the Spartan Pasicrates and cures Latro of his suicidal depression.

When Pindaros sings for Latro, the dream Latro experiences actually serves to lift the mercenary from his debilitating depression: he subsequently triumphs in every combat event at the Pythian Games. Latro would also have won the chariot race if he had not had other plans. He escapes Greece at last by starting a small *latrocinium*⁷ of his own against the Argives by inspiring a slave uprising. The shared dream nurtured by Pindaros' song does not seem to contain any earth-shattering revelations, but Latro, Pasicrates, and Aglaus each experience the vision slightly differently. While Latro clearly sees that Pasicrates strikes Aglaus in the throat, and Pasicrates admits hitting him as well, Aglaus believes that it is Latro himself who strikes him. This synthesis between Pasicrates and Latro remains one of the most difficult moments in the entire series to contextualize. To make sense of it, we almost have to accept that the characters represent ideologies. When Thamyris calls Latro Pleistorus, he also acknowledges that the Spartans are the most warlike people on earth. The nature of the gods seems to be influenced by their worshippers to some degree, even though their provinces generally remain static. As an embodiment of *arete* and the excellent manly virtues of war, Latro would of course be affected by the most warlike people on Earth. Pasicrates, therefore, represents the twisted Spartan ideal: dominating, aggressive, but not without some human characteristics, though they are dreadfully misplaced. The manumission ceremony in which the helots are slain affects Latro profoundly,

⁷A war without a formal declaration of war as understood by Roman law—Wolfe is excellent at squeezing every last connotation out of a name, and this extends to the designation of the repentant thief crucified next to Jesus at Golgotha – often designated in medieval art as *latro poenitans*.

and just as Latro seems to represent *arete*, Pasicrates embodies an unforgiving and merciless Spartan approach to war and love.

Pasicrates attempts to twist excellence and manly striving to his own ends, thus when he hits Aglaus in the throat, he is misusing the strength and power he has. His philosophy is still one of *arete*, and thus it is somehow Latro acting as well: the principles of manly virtue are perverted to domination rather than protection and justice. As Latro says immediately after the dream, it is not the place of humanity to try to dictate the parameters of greatness:

Let [a man] fill each day with honor and joy. Let him not condemn himself or another, for he does not know the laws of his existence or theirs. If he sleeps in death, let him sleep. If while sleeping he should meet a god, he must let the god decide how well or ill he lived.

The god he meets must rule upon a man's life, never the man himself. (612)

Pasicrates and the Spartans have been attempting to take the place of the gods, believing in the rightness of their might. Indeed, though it is not mentioned in the text, they historically kept a representation of Ares chained so that the spirit of war would never leave them (Schrader). How would a god judge them? The contrasting of these dualistic Platonic ideals against reality represents a consistent pattern in the text. When Latro speculates that the brothel mistress Kalleos is somehow the written word which copies the spoken word that is the goddess of love Aphrodite, he might very well be voicing a concept which applies to him: the letter of *arete* is being twisted by the Spartans in their quest for excellence, for they have misunderstood its original essence. Thus, when Pasicrates acts out of perverted *arete*, Latro metaphorically (and metaphysically) strikes as well. In order for war to be redeemed from the evil of the Spartans, they must either change or lose their power.

The dream seems to accomplish both ends: Pasicrates embraces Latro like a true brother before the games, and comes close but fails in every event, bearing his wounds with dignity. He hides the leg injury that he suffered when he faced down the boar which killed Lykaon, another symbolic moment echoing the rise of a lame and broken (but extremely brave and competent) Spartan philosophy in the wake of the Achaean loss of power in Greece. It does not seem that Pasicrates actually has magic, save for his influence with the Triple Goddess in her most chthonic form. The young warrior is merely emblematic of everything that is wrong with Sparta: promise and discipline turned to evil and destructive ends, the product of a war-like society entirely devoid of moral fiber and justice. His redemption lies in the fact that he still seeks love, though it is misplaced. If Latro is indeed an avatar of war and violence, seeing the twisted results of a life dedicated to the pursuit of domination and pain might have crippled Latro's ability to see the nobility of the warrior: human strength is only useful insofar as it can defend the weak. If Latro personifies *arete*, then Pasicrates and the Spartan's misuse of its precepts have been poisoning him. At the end, when we see Latro escape with the silver figure of Artemis beside him (though she seems to have been defeated), perhaps he has purified war once again, and the patroness representing Sparta now stands unified with him in a more empyreal guise. As the trainer Diokles' description of Ares asserts, the God of War is not a monstrous figure of cruelty and violence, but rather a figure closer to the ideology of Mars, whose symbol is the wolf.

One other association that strikes twice in the novels involves crocodiles: when Pasicrates first throws Latro into the waters during their wrestling match, the necromancer Drakaina senses crocodiles. Later, when Pasicrates challenges Latro's right to compete at the Pythian Games, Latro's memory palace reveals two figures: the crocodile-headed statue which must be Sobek, and the hawk-headed one which is certainly the War God Horus. This does not mean that

Pasicrates is literally the god Sobek, but there are some mythological echoes which are worth exploring.

Sobek began as a sinister figure and a god of the waters of the Nile. While Ahura Mazda would eventually be joined to a water god in Persia, Latro's feeling as he looks at the water that he himself is a watery deity might actually stem from Egyptian mythology instead. Sobek controlled the waters, but he is also intimately involved in the story of Horus, eventually becoming synthesized into him, also a god of armies and war. At one point, Sobek is even tasked with retrieving the severed hands of Horus from the water. Some sects even believed that Sobek created the world and gave it order. When Horus retrieved parts of Osiris's body, he took the form of a crocodile, further strengthening the association between the two Egyptian war gods. Sobek began as a dark god to be appeased, but eventually became a figure of protection. (Bresciani 200-201). The Spartans and their representative Pasicrates risk turning the embodiment of war into a caricature of what he once was, perhaps forcing a reversion into the atavistic and chthonic violence Sobek originally represented. However, when Latro returns Pasicrates's hand in their shared dream (which Latro chopped off at the climax of the first volume), their ill-will dissipates. Flaws and mistakes can be redeemed, and the noble virtues of justice and order can sanctify the profane.

While the text strongly suggests that Latro bears the favor of the gods, his ability to complete the task of the demigod Sisyphus in rolling his boulder all the way up the hill and to intimidate and wound other gods such as Zalmoxis indicate that he is not merely mortal. At one point in the text, when Latro confronts Kore, also known as Persephone, in the "basement" of her temple in Eleusis, he even questions his own nature. Latro apologizes for injuring Kore's mother, and she acknowledges that he has become less stiff-necked. When she offers to convey his

apology and almost sarcastically says that she will plead his case, the fury in Latro's eyes engenders fear in her; he even reaches for his sword Falcata, which has not been permitted in the temple. This leads to her challenge: "You threaten me. Do you not know that I cannot be harmed by a common mortal?"

Latro's response should also prompt readers to actively question his nature: "No, I don't know that. Nor that I'm a common mortal. Perhaps I am. Perhaps not" (Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist* 149). He resolves to use his bare hands against her, and she calls Death to her side. Latro fearlessly insists that he will face Death if he must, and she calls him a true hero. However, the efficacy of the compulsion which seems to circumvent Latro's own will for a time would also suggest that Latro remains very far from all powerful, and that he suffers all the limitations of humans: can one being be fully human and fully divine?

While I have argued that Latro is Ares, it might be more accurate to assess him in light of his Roman heritage as Mars, a far more noble and important God to Rome than to Greece, for in that devotion, he is part of the holy "archaic triad" with Jupiter and Quirinus. Indeed, the renewal through death which Mars signifies makes him closer to Apollo than to Greek representations of Ares, justifying the copious sun and light imagery associated with the man formerly known as Lucius. This Roman version of the god of war was also a deity of agriculture and the earth. His dual nature included the active principles of the spear and the passive aegis of the shield. In addition, Juno is said to have given birth to Mars without Jupiter in Ovid's account, when the goddess Flora impregnated her by touching her stomach with a flower after testing it on a heifer. When it is suggested that Pleistorus is at times Kotytto's lover, identified with Rhea, we need look no further than Mars's relationship with Rhea Silvia, who bore him Romulus and Remus, to find a parallel in Rome. The infiltration of solar qualities to the province of Mars might also link

him to Dionysus or Bacchus, the god of the vine and sun-driven vegetative growth. Clearly, the deity that the Huntress seeks at the Bacchanalia bears some of those same traits, but Dionysus, like Zalmoxis, is something of a false alarm. The promise of renewal through death strikes a powerful chord that resonates with the Christian narrative.

Indeed, the crucifixion elements at work in the second volume, from Artayctes's death and pierced side to the descent into the underworld at Corinth and the rolling aside of a boulder to pierce the veil between life and death, indicate that all of the symbolic pieces are in place to actualize the redemption and salvation of humanity in Wolfe's novel. Perhaps the fishes jumping out of the frying pan before Artayctes's crucifixion attain some of the transcendent symbolic power of later Christianity – facing the persecution of Rome, the early Christians used the fish symbol to identify friends and safe gathering spaces, coming to represent hope and deliverance from the fires of unjust suffering and hopelessness. Readers should recall, even though it is not obvious until almost the entire book has passed, when Artayctes prays to Ahura Mazda for deliverance, Latro actually incapacitates the guards and offers him a chance to escape. For fear of retribution from Xanthippos, who plays the role of Pontius Pilate with the fate of his son, Artayctes refuses to go of his own will. The identification of the repentant thief crucified with Christ as *latro poenitens* should indicate that this crucifixion imagery throughout the second volume is a feature of Wolfe's conscious design.

The primary importance of Latro's experiences, whether he is literally Mars and Ahura Mazda or not, is that the gods (or the powerful servants of a higher, Unseen God who are called gods by humanity) learn and change from them. The state of the world and the human suffering Latro experiences demand justice and peace, to transform the terrible and distant cruelty of both the heavens and humanity into mercy, kindness, and love. This overwhelming Christian message

in a pagan context, coupled with our close look at “Trip, Trap,” can hopefully credibly suggest that Wolfe is a conscious symbolist with very sincere spiritual ideas about the relationship between the human and the divine. The Christian imagery saturating his “pagan” historical fantasy subordinates the symbols in those texts to a universal end, reconciling incompatible world views into a unified and cogent tradition supported by his faith. None of the existing and extended critical approaches emphasize this aspect of his art, as they are more concerned with the nebulous and the relative. However, Wolfe’s subtext often works against that relativism, though it is not always easy to unearth.

Chapter Three: The Collective Unconscious and Archetypes – Knowing without Knowing

One of the central arguments of this overarching examination of Wolfe's technique involves his fiction's close relationship to historical and literary traditions. This conscious use of such vast and ancient material makes his work particularly amenable to the analytical methods of critics invested in archetypes. One of the arguments that I make quite frequently involves Wolfe's intense respect for tradition: if readers could know everything about literature, history, myth, and religion, most of Wolfe's narrative mysteries might very well vanish under the harsh light of *gnosis*. This is perhaps never clearer than in his treatment of one of the most enduring legends of our time – the mythical cycles surrounding King Arthur. Wolfe's ostensibly Arthurian novel *Castleview* (1990) has been met with some harsh reviews even from his staunchest champions, and his other attempt at integrating Arthuriana in the two-volume *Wizard Knight* has also drawn some criticism.

Castleview begins with the mysterious death of husband and father Tom Howard even as he considers selling his house. The novel is extremely episodic, and though it is set in a contemporary environment, fantastic elements from multiple traditions keep bleeding into reality. Martin Crookal reviews the novel as follows, criticizing it for its lack of emotion and strange pacing:

For the longest part of the story, this is an apparently mainstream novel. Willie Shields is a newcomer to the Town of Castleview, Illinois, where he has purchased a car dealership, bringing with him his wife, Anne Schindler and 16-year-old daughter, Mercedes Schindler-Shields. The book actually begins with a very brief scene involving the murder

of Tom Howard, at a time when a Realtor is conducting the Shields family around his home, with a view to buying it.

But *Castleview* is named for its relatively regular optical illusion of a castle, that not everyone sees, and whilst driving back to their Motel, the Shields car has to brake suddenly to avoid colliding with an unnaturally large black horse, ridden by a black-shrouded rider.

Not that Wolfe takes any immediate steps to develop these hints of something more than natural, although they do form the basis for two of the three legs of a story that expands, rapidly and massively, over the next twenty-four hours, until it exits the mundanity of *Castleview* into an oblique replaying of the legends of King Arthur that rushes at the reader with all the speed of events thus far, but little in the way of clarity.

And I am far from being the only reader to fail to discern even the most unfocussed purpose of this book.

Wolfe's goal throughout the book is an oddly historical excavation of the very concept of "romance," and the lack of feeling which Crookal picks up on after Will Shields seemingly dies in a confrontation with the fay forces which abruptly emerge at the end of the novel is perhaps the central concern of the text. Crookal continues:

There's seemingly little emotion in [Will Shields'] death from [his wife] Anne and [his daughter] Mercedes, though Wolfe has stirred enough in during the long account to suggest that Willy would not find this strange, whilst not suggesting in the slightest that Anne would react this way.

But there are things elsewhere that cross the boundary, and for which Wolfe has been criticised [sic], both elsewhere and here, and here the accusations fly very close to home.

Wolfe has been criticised [sic] for his handling of women. Certainly, in his personal life, he was as conservative as he was Catholic, wanting his wife Rosemary to stay at home, run their household, whilst he was the provider. To be honest, I don't have any issues with his women, generally, but there are instances in *Castleview* that, right from my first reading, that I have never been able to convince myself are believable.

Throughout, Sally Howard's response to her husband's death, a husband she's supposed to have loved, is completely unreal. It's one thing to say that she's in shock, but from the moment von Madadh appears, and within literally minutes, she is measuring him up as a future husband, and by the end of the book, having seen him tear out Will Shields' throat with his teeth, she is in bed with him, in the former marital bed, not much more than twelve hours after Tom's murder, and sixteen year old Seth is nodding his approval at his mother finding a new man who's quite clearly giving her a bloody good fucking at that very moment.

It's unreal. It has nothing to do with human nature. If it's meant to be an outcome of the mythic battle that gradually rises through the mundane affairs of *Castleview*, then Wolfe does too little, to the point of nothing, to reconcile us to this, or make it understandable, let alone acceptable.

Yet I do like *Castleview*, find it full of good writing, find it's hurry-scurry, dense and intricate development constantly entertaining. It doesn't weary me as it does others. But the merger of the two worlds, the introduction of the Arthurian aspect, and its incredulous sexual responses bring the book crashing down at its ending.

It's not the first, nor the last Wolfe book that I don't fully understand. But in the end, it doesn't inspire me to hunt out deeper explanations.

Of course, these criticisms fail to apprehend exactly what modern malaise Wolfe is tracing as the primary theme of the novel: the decay of romance from its Arthurian roots to the debased effects of modernity, creating empty and vapid relationships in which spouses are just as often enemies as they are allies, with a sense of the great universal loss occasionally given voice in the vacuum of contemporary society. Even the daughter's hyphenated name, unique in Wolfe's oeuvre, illustrates how far from tradition this modern family has strayed. One character approaches the concept of a tragic absence in her thoughts:

This, then, was why she had wept in childhood, although she had not known it. Then there had been only the unfocused sense of loss – the unplumbed knowledge that in the end the world would take away everything, even the worst things, so that at the end, when she had nothing left, she would miss them; and surely it would take all the good things, all the best things, the good things first of all. That her most beautiful dresses would turn ugly, hideous and foolish, merely by hanging in the closet; and that all the people, all the most beautiful people, the ones she loved best, would fall to rags. (Wolfe, *Castleview* 87-8)

To understand how Wolfe has chosen to approach the very idea of “romance” and its changing nature over time, for once, archetypal literary criticism might help us articulate the surprisingly controversial concept of Wolfe's actual intention (or at least, an attempt at presenting a logical approximation of it). In the case of *Castleview*, the direct portrayal of the survival of myth and (more importantly) romance into the contemporary, mundane world has a fairly close relationship with Northrop Frye's exploration of the modes of fiction in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. Unlike many fantasists, Wolfe never quite leaves behind at least the semblance of mimesis, or “representation,” of the real world in his fiction. If escapism is present in his work, it

usually has a kind of sophisticated interaction with reality. In Wolfe, sometimes the escape his characters most desire is one from an incomprehensible and unbelievable destiny, rather than from the dull monotony of everyday life, made banal by its exhaustion in the realistic and naturalistic novels which dominated the mainstream literary scene of the twentieth-century.

In *Castleview*, the “matter of Britain” gains an urban fantasy spin that creates a temporal dissonance, leaving readers with the sense that perhaps this novel came simultaneously too early and too late for the time in which it was published. It exists in close dialogue with the romantic tradition in literature, confronting in almost playful fashion all of the disparate connotations of “romance.” In “A Second View of *Castleview*,” Joe R. Christopher observes that “Wolfe seems to structure [*Castleview*] on the pattern of medieval French Arthurian romances: that is, he is interweaving a series of related stories; this interlacement (to echo the French term) means that most of his chapters have several discrete episodes” (66). Christopher notes that the novel lacks the standard transitions typical of this genre: “Instead, Wolfe has built up many of the sections to a surprise twist of some sort. This is a later tradition of structure” (67). I will defer to Christopher’s superior knowledge of Arthurian romance, but I will also take this observation one step further in claiming that *Castleview* chronicles the evolution of once magical romantic ideals to their strangled survival in the modern world. While “romance” loses much of its traditional weight in contemporary society, it can never be vanquished entirely, for it rests at the heart of fulfillment as an individual, for better or for worse. For once, the subjective nature of individual self-fulfillment and realization finally becomes a theme almost devoid of irony in a Wolfe novel, though the yearning for a golden and magical past still seems to operate as an innate ideal.

The novel shares a very strange feature with Wolfe’s earlier *Free Live Free* and *There Are Doors* in illustrating metaphors through allegorical characters and situations. In *Free Live*

Free, Ben Free's allegiances and shifting identities make figurative sense if he is viewed as a kind of avatar for America, tracing its ideological shifts and philosophies in his own person: newer trends like "McCarthyism" are features of his younger self, while the older Free goes back in time to explore the forging of America's frontier with Lewis and Clark, eventually becoming an antiquated ideal besieged by the modern world. *Castleview* shares many of the features of what I have called "urban allegory," but this time Wolfe has created a literal exploration of romance rather than of America or even Britain.

By the end of the novel, we get the sense that King Arthur's descendants are lurking everywhere, his influence and blood diffused across the boundaries of time and arbitrary national borders. According to "A Second View of *Castleview*," "the essential fact is that King Arthur in this novel is William Shields, the owner of a car dealership, who does not know he is Arthur, although the beings of the Isle of Glass know him" (69). Christopher's article does not seem to stress the universal nature of Arthur's gene pool here: all of the characters could *potentially* pick up Excalibur and serve as humanity's champion. While destiny might not be concentrated in one unique individual, it does rely upon the expression of certain characteristics. Many of these characters consider themselves ordinary, but any of them could answer the call to fight in the final conflict, for Arthur's descendants proliferate across the breadth and depth of the modern world. This dispersal of Arthur's descendants into many individuals is contrasted with Viviane Morgan's amalgamation from several sources and figures, acting at times as the Lady of the Lake, at others as the incestuous Morgause from other Arthurian legends. In the call to the final battle, Morgan's voice calls out to a multitude: "My brothers! We have summoned you, your lemen, your knights and ladies to battle, for we will take you fairly if we can. Choose your

champion. Who is the bravest you breed? The strongest and most skilled?" (Wolfe, *Castleview* 271). Shields answers that call, but he is not the only "brother" to Morgan.

Christopher also criticizes Wolfe's decision to have Morgan use a prose version of Tennyson's account of Arthur's death and the return of Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake at the culmination of the novel, asking, "[W]hy does Morgan quote a nineteenth-century rendition? ... [S]urely Tennyson is not superior to Malory simply as *narrative*. Perhaps Morgan thinks Judy will not understand an earlier version. But [it] does seem odd. No one, I fancy, has claimed that Tennyson was elvishly inspired to produce the most accurate account in history of Arthur's death" (Christopher 75). Wolfe has always been interested in syncretism and how stories can change over time, while still remaining at their essence identifiable and distinct, and in combining a variety of different sources and stories, *Castleview* traces a *tradition* of romance; Wolfe is not interested in sticking with the original source when how these legends change over time also illuminates their application in a constantly transforming world. If the "Matter of Britain" actually survives in the modern world at all, then Malory is only a fraction of that evolving and possibly cyclical story. In addition, Tennyson offers a more modern romantic yearning for a time long vanished in the segment quoted by Wolfe, stating one of the themes lurking behind the novel quite clearly: "*I think that we shall never more, at any future time, delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds, walking about the gardens and the halls of Camelot, as in the days that were*" (Wolfe, *Castleview* 246).

Beyond its Arthurian particulars, *Castleview* attempts a holistic echo of "Romance Literature," which was originally named for the influence of French tradition in the mid-twelfth-century. Anglo-Norman was one of the dominant literary languages of England during this time, and the catch-all term also attempts to describe the translation of Latin into the everyday

language of speech. The Romantic Tradition extended across Europe and had a wide-ranging effect on self-expression, the concept of individuality divorced from the status of birth, and on art as a whole. *Castleview* is no different in its eclectic group of characters and references, from “Puss in Boots” and the character of Lucie D’Carabas with her French pretensions to the ironically chivalrous and ineffectual Brazilian José Alvarez Martim Basilio Bonifacio Balanco, bent on avenging his sister’s injury. (One of Wolfe’s references is lost in the middle of that string of names: Martim means kingfisher, and of course we expect the Fisher King to show up in Arthurian myth. The Fisher King is the last keeper of the grail, suffering from a debilitating or emasculating wound. Balanco’s chivalry is twisted to sterile and easily manipulated ends as he enacts this role, but rather than being healed, he is summarily destroyed by a character to whom the concept means less than nothing; chivalry no longer seems to function as it once did in a modern context.)

Returning to romance in general, the most prominent medieval romances involve King Arthur and his court, and, as always, Wolfe seeds the text with obscure references in this vein. For example, the undertaker in the novel is named Fouque. At one point, the mysterious Dr. Rex von Madadh mishears his name as *Fuchs*, which prompts him to expound upon his dislike of foxes. However, Baron Fouqué was a prominent German romance writer of fantasies in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century. He also versified sixteenth-century tales of medieval chivalry and translated the Nibelung legends; giving the undertaker this name is yet another jibe at the death of the romantic tradition in the modern world. Of course, some of the characters in the morgue refuse to stay dead, such as Balanco’s sister, who seems to recover from a temporary case of spiritual vampirism and return to life at the culmination of the story. Baron Fouqué also wrote a fairy-tale novel called *Undine*, in which a water spirit attempts to gain a soul in the most

natural way – by marrying a knight. As we shall see at the conclusion of the novel, Morgan calls herself the daughter of a sea fairy, and she finally gets the fraternal knight she desires as a mate in the final pages. Wolfe continues this pattern in other minor character names. The real physician at the trauma center, De Falla, shares the name of one of the most influential Spanish composers of the twentieth-century, though the bulk of his work is considered Neo-classical rather than romantic. In the novel, the romantic figure of von Madadh seems to take his place, literally stealing his patients away. Of course, beneath the complex treatment of the romantic tradition, *Castleview* overtly emphasizes in its plot and tone the importance of establishing and maintaining familial relationships, geared toward the continuation of a family into the future.

A brief treatment of the plot will make Wolfe's use of archetypes and the romantic literary tradition stand out slightly more. After an opening quote from Sir Thomas Malory in which Merlin berates Arthur for preferring the sword, ("*[F]or the scabbard is worth ten of the swords, for whiles ye have the scabbard upon you, ye shall never lose no blood be ye never so sore wounded, therefor keep well the scabbard always with you*"), *Castleview* begins with the death of Tom Howard. He has considered selling his house, located, according to Chapter One's title, "At the edge of the fields." Meanwhile, Will Shields and his family are determined to integrate into the small community at Castleview after he purchases a car dealership there. His wife is a writer of niche cookbooks. Their daughter Mercedes quickly becomes interested in Tom Howard's son Seth, though Tom perishes even before they can make an offer on the house.

Much of the rest of the story occurs along the road which runs through the city of Castleview. Seth takes Mercedes out to try and see the mysterious castle which gives the city its name, which Shields glimpsed from the attic window of the Howard's residence. Those who see the ghostly castle always view it differently in terms of color, shape, and location, and some have

never seen it at all. The movements of Will Shields and his wife Ann Schindler control much of the rest of the narrative. After visiting a museum filled with Arthurian decor built by Sally Howard's ancestor, Doc Dunstan, Will is surprised when one of his older employees (Tom Howard's father-in-law) disappears. Ann winds up exploring a summer camp for girls called Meadow Grass, which has been besieged by mysterious malcontents, especially when the weather is bad. (Later it is heavily implied that one of the girls is responsible for much of the disturbance, especially in inviting external forces in by opening the camp's gates.) The camp currently houses three girls and twenty-one horses under the care of Lisa Solomon and Arthur Dunstan. As Ann is driving away, she finds one of the girls, Lucie d'Carabas, stowed away in her back seat. She also locates the wounded Arthur Dunstan in the woods, getting him medical attention. Lucie says she hopes to meet with a man she identifies as a "friend" in town.

Meanwhile, Sally Howard deals with the loss of her husband at her house, visited in turn by her mother, sister, niece, a shadowy figure named Liam Fee, a deputy, Lucie d'Carabas (who at first speaks without her French accent) as she seeks to "report" to Fee, an elderly neighbor named Almah Cosgriff, the almost ghostly return of her dead dog Rex, and Dr. Rex von Madadh, who will quickly capture her imagination. During that time, her kitchen window is broken and Fee gains entrance under the pretense of searching for an intruder. He also breaks a mirror upstairs and offers to buy the house with a check he refuses to take back. Sally also catches a glimpse of a large hairy figure outside with glowing eyes. The deputy shoots at it, later describing it as being accompanied by a large dog or hound.

After a brief interlude between Will Shields and Ann Schindler at the Golden Dragon Chinese restaurant, in which Shield's questions about the castle disturb their waiter, a bad wreck involving Seth and Mercedes moves the action to the hospital. One of the local legends involves

a mysterious woman in white who is frequently spotted along the highway, supposedly being followed by a dark rider. Seeing the dark rider's eyes means death. Before their accident, Seth and Mercedes meet her and her companion, the tall and thin Jim Long, who attentive readers learned quite early in the novel was killed by a hit-and-run driver almost a decade before the action started. The accident occurs in Long's rusty car. The paramedics and medical staff treating Seth, Mercedes, and the other people involved are for the most part unable to perceive the woman in white, who goes by the name Viviane Morgan, and her skeletal companion, even though the fay figures continue to interact with Mercedes during her treatment at the hospital.

Strange illusions proliferate as the Chinese waiter, Hwan Lee, tries to assassinate Arthur Dunstan in the hospital, under some compulsion which grants him the appearance of Seth Howard (at least, as Mercedes sees him). Mercedes foils the attempt. Meanwhile, one of the girls at Meadow Grass is shot by a mysterious long-distance assailant, seemingly fatally. The other two girls also vanish, as does Sally Howard's niece Judy, who flees Liam Fee into the turret room of the Victorian Howard residence and somehow escapes through its window to find herself in the floating castle so many have seen.

The text makes great effort to establish that most of its characters are related through the character of Doc Dunstan, who originally built the museum and left his journal behind. Even the previous owner of Meadow Grass, Silvia Baxter (whose name literally means “Baker from the forest”), left her camp for girls to Arthur Dunstan because of an implied familial relationship. Much of the story hints that King Arthur's descendants might be found amongst the Dunstans, Howards, or Roberts in the story, and as the forces gather for a final confrontation between the fairy court and the ordinary town of car dealerships and highways, Dr. Rex von Madadh prepares those left behind to face Viviane Morgan. Claiming to be a member of the Daoine Institute,

founded by Michael Daoine (a contractor and builder who moved to the United States in the closing years of the 19th century) Rex von Madadh is eventually revealed to be the champion of the fairy forces, representing their best qualities. Sally Howard grows increasingly attracted to him. (Readers should keep in mind that the Daoine Sidhe or the Deeny Shee were the remnants of the divine folk of Irish folklore, who remained in Ireland and dwell in the fairy mounds of legend.)

Amidst an increasingly fantastic narrative in which one of the girls from Meadow Grass introduces Sally's nephew Judy to the Winter King Geimhreadh and a gargoyle transforms into a sentient, gun toting feline who calls itself G. Gordon Kitty, Shields and the others drive into fairy land through a shortcut off the highway (which shouldn't exist) and engage with the ape-like and bizarre forces who serve Viviane Morgan. Shields, to his own surprise, finds himself the champion, and is defeated by Rex von Madadh. The rest escape after the legendary Green Man, who seems to be a cognate of Odin mounted upon Sleipnir, engaged in the pursuit of Morgan during his Wild Hunt, and also bows before Geimhreadh to be beheaded. Most of the characters return home to resume their relationships or form new ones, following the traditional ending of stories which are deemed Comedies: Arthur Dunstan proposes to Lisa Solomon, Mercedes and Seth seem to have entered into a relationship, and Sally Howard has found comfort in the arms of the possibly dog-like Rex von Madadh. The epilogue shows Will Shields awaken underwater with Viviane Morgan, who advises him to sleep and recover, calling him brother and lover. This is all well and good, but one gets the sense that the surface narrative is the least of what Wolfe is doing in this novel.

If I were asked to summarize the climax in one sentence, I would say that it is a romance in which a troll, a ghost, some teens, King Arthur, an alien, a single mother, Puss-in-Boots, and a

hen-pecked car salesman walk into a fairy forest and almost get hit by a rusty ford. With that beautiful summary, it is worth considering the diverse modes of fiction Wolfe synthesizes in this very strange novel. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye explores many different motifs, archetypes, and modes which help create a structured approach to literary analysis and criticism. His overall classification of fiction based on the qualities of the characters depicted in it actually illuminates the otherwise haphazard assortment of characters and stories crammed into Wolfe's novel. We will not concern ourselves with every tragic, comic, and thematic distinction Frye discusses, but the categories he identifies for myth, high mimesis, low mimesis, and irony are immensely useful in thinking about Wolfe's purpose. Frye also has something to say about symbols and motifs which could be illuminating for many works of genre fiction, though his approach seems to be currently lumped in with New Criticism and Formalism (which he was actually, in part, reacting against) as a somewhat antiquated ideology for literary criticism – for those acquainted with the history of literary criticism, it should be obvious that I prefer these methods over any and all [post]modern/post-structural approaches to Wolfe's work. In these more traditional modes, objects are imbued with universal, catholic, or archetypal qualities whether they are accurately perceived or not. My primary disagreement with these older schools of criticism lies primarily in my stubborn insistence on the primacy of authorial intent, especially in puzzle box narratives: once upon a time, the only person on Earth who knew the solutions to many of Wolfe's riddles, puzzles, and narrative contradictions was Wolfe himself.

In light of Frye's presentation of the width and depth of literary romance, *Castleview* really begins to make structural sense. We start with the assertion that fiction may be classified by the hero's power of action. If his or her power is superior in kind to other people and he exercises that authority over the environment, the story is mythic. Wolfe obviously loves myths

and presenting characters with extraordinary destinies or supernatural abilities, and the presence of the Green Man and Odin's horse Sleipnir in *Castleview* is enough to clue readers in on the mythical backdrop of this novel. The constant synthesis of myths allows the fertility rituals involving the Green Man, the divine power of Odin, and the appropriation of the Wild Hunt to King Arthur and his hounds to all be simultaneously invoked. Below myth, we find heroes of renown and might who are still identifiably human in Frye's classification system:

If superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of *romance*, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. Here we have moved from myth, properly so called, into legend, folk tale, *marchen*, and their literary affiliates and derivatives. (Frye 33)

If Puss-in-Boots in the form of G. Gordon Kitty doesn't quite convince readers, then perhaps the woman in white and the undead Jim Long will: these folk stories are part and parcel of *Castleview*.

Frye goes on to differentiate between the high and low mimetic modes, in which the hero is in the first case a leader or, in the second, a quite ordinary man, and then takes it one step further by introducing the concept of the ironic mode: "If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the *ironic* mode" (34). The car dealership owner Will Shields, at times tyrannized by his wife's desires, seems to resemble the low mimetic hero rather than the

high: he used to race cars, but having a daughter (whom he also names after a car, transforming a pass-time into a responsibility) quite convinced him it was too dangerous (and also seems to have changed Ann Schindler into a distinctly non-romantic person, at least as concerns her husband and their intimacy). Rather than race cars, he now sells them, further transforming that passion into a means of making ends meet. The ironic characters in *Castleview* include the self-deluding and suicidal Kate (Sally Howard's sister) and perhaps even Liam Fee, who seems to be set up as a creature of darkness and the priest of an eldritch pagan god, but who winds up looking pathetic and incompetent. Readers find him inebriated in one scene, crying helplessly at Tom Howard's viewing, and finally easily beaten by a diminutive Chinese waiter while being exposed as a generic, tubular, and many-eyed alien, even though Fee entered the scene with every advantage and the waiter was incarcerated and unarmed.

Frye claims that "European fiction, during the last fifteen centuries, has steadily moved its center of gravity down the list" from mythic to ironic representations (34). In the most traditional of literary categories, there are two broad stories: the tragedy and the comedy. It is a rather trite aphorism that traditional tragedies end in death and mourning, while comedies end in marriage and celebration. *Castleview* is no different: the various couples seem to solidify their domestic partnerships, but Will Shields finds a way to escape his marriage in a conceivably non-permanent death. The Green Man dies at the hands of King Geimhreadh, whose name implies winter, but the cycle continues, and, one day, winter will in turn fall to spring and burgeoning life. Of tragedies, Frye says:

Tragic stories, when they apply to divine beings, may be called Dionysiac. ... The association of a god's death with autumn or sunset does not, in literature, necessarily mean that he is a god "of" vegetation or the sun, but only that he is a god capable of

dying, whatever his department. . . . The same associations with sunset and the fall of the leaf linger in romance, where the hero is still half a god. In romance the suspension of natural law and the individualizing of the hero's exploits reduce nature largely to the animal and vegetable world. Much of the hero's life is spent with animals, or at any rate the animals that are incurable romantics, such as horses, dogs, and falcons, and the typical setting of romance is the forest. (36)

The forest which leads to the castle in *Castleview* is of course part of standard fairy tale traditions, but the provenance of horses, meadows, stables, and fortresses have somehow transformed into cars, roads, and car dealerships in the modern world. This illustrates the ever-changing nature of the human environment, leaving behind these romantic images in theory while still predicating so many desires and wants on the same primal yearning. (The widowed Sally Howard clearly displays her burgeoning desires for comfort and security even before the return of her dog Rex. Dr. Rex von Madadh, whose name means "King of the Dogs," is a being so surrounded by those romantic associations she cannot be presumed to perceive him accurately through the veil of hopeful illusions blinding her to reality, even if they have something of a mercenary quality to them, especially given the extremely recent death of her husband. Most of the novel occurs in one day, and Tom Howard dies in the first chapter.) When the young girl Judy Youngberg attempts to escape the tower at the end of the novel, she imagines that her escape will be aided by ivy growing along its edges. Ivy's most obvious association is of course with Dionysus, and the symbolic sacrifice necessary for the coming of winter (which might be seen as a kind of maturity) allows all of the children who have been taken to the fairy land to be reunited with their parents and older companions at the conclusion of the story.

The novel is not without its tragic strains, as can be illustrated in the suicidal fate of Judy's depressed mother and the figure of Lucie d'Carabas, so desperate to appear exotic and foreign that she seems willing to make dark bargains. Frye goes on to assert that in low mimesis, tragedy is expressed in pathos: "Pathos presents its hero as isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is on our own level of experience. I speak of a hero, but the central figure of pathos is often a woman or a child And we have a whole procession of pathetic female sacrifices in English low mimetic fiction" (38). One of those characters is certainly Sally's sister, the abandoned Kate, who pretends not to care that her daughter and ex-husband are gone. She carelessly plays with a pistol until the shock of the Wild Hunt catches up to her, sending her to the Fay Lands where her torn spirit yearns to be reunited with her daughter.

While there are many examples of irony throughout *Castleview*, Frye emphasizes that "the central principle of tragic irony is that whatever exceptional happens to the hero should be causally out of line with his character" (41). The actions of Ann Schindler, Will Shields, and even the waiter Hwan Lee are almost certainly developed out of this ironic sense, especially when it is Will Shields who steps forward as the descendant of King Arthur, after so much time was spent in building up that Bob Roberts, Arthur Dunstan, and Tom Howard were all probably related to the Arthurian lineage and were actively being sought out by the forces of Morgan le Fay. After all, "There's many more that bear the king's blood" (Wolfe, *Castleview* 247). Frye stresses that tragedy usually involves a victim, which he calls a *Pharmakos* or scapegoat, whose sacrifice is belied by their accrual of an almost symbolic innocence. This innocence represents a strange progression through the modes we have discussed: "Irony descends from the low mimetic: it begins in realism and dispassionate observation. But as it does so, it moves steadily

towards myth, and the dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it. Our five modes evidently go around in a circle” (Frye 42).

The denouement of *Castleview*, in which the child Judy brushes Morgan’s hair and sees her childhood companion G. Gordon Kitty brought to life, reveals a kind of playful comic relief to an otherwise bleak conclusion. According to Frye, “the element of *play* is the barrier that separates art from savagery, and playing at human sacrifice seems to be an important theme of ironic comedy” (46). This fake sacrifice is implicit both in the surrender of the Green Man and in the “death” of Will Shields, for he will someday awaken to another role, when winter passes and spring comes again. While I have quoted Frye extensively, there are several more genre points he makes in his discussion which help rationalize two other odd features of Wolfe’s text:

The fact that we are now in an ironic phase of literature largely accounts for the popularity of the detective story, the formula of how a man-hunter locates a *Pharmakos* and gets rid of him. ... But as we move further away ... we move toward a ritual drama around a corpse in which a wavering finger of social condemnation passes over a group of “suspects” and finally settles on one. The sense of a victim chosen by lot is very strong, for the case against him is only plausibly manipulated. (46)

The story opens with the probable murder of Tom Howard, a corpse doomed to be replaced by Rex von Madadh, with his most lachrymose mourner possibly the “man” accused of killing him, Liam Fee (unless Fee is actually mourning his uselessness as Sally Howard's suitor, where von Madadh seems to have succeeded). This man hunt for Tom Howard's death is never truly undertaken, and the Wild Hunt itself has an extremely nebulous aim. As Ann Schindler recounts to Hwan Lee at the end, “We were chasing a man on a horse – shooting at him, even. Then we found out *he* was chasing that woman who whistled – she was the one who got Mercedes into so

much trouble, we think, so we started chasing *her*” (Wolfe, *Castleview* 270-1). The arbitrary and confused nature of this hunt and the absolute absence of any true guilt confound both the characters and the reader. The kidnapers of Bob Roberts and the shooters of Sancha Balanka are described only in vague terms; presumably the fairy creatures who serve Morgan are guilty rather than bored kids from the town, though it is also heavily implied that Lucie is the vulnerable factor from inside the camp who allows them entrance, according to Sissy’s suspicions. The manner in which these occurrences are left to an assumed common culprit, especially when Rex von Madadh comes across so sympathetically, highlights that the body in question as a symbol of the dead king not truly and forever dead is far more important than whoever attempted to destroy him. The murder mystery in *Castleview* never really takes off, stagnating in a genre stew that culminates in a plot twist that many readers are not even sure to take seriously: it is hinted that Excalibur is made from meteoric materials, and that a planet beyond Mars, now destroyed, once housed an advanced civilization whose remnants survive only in fragmentary form in the shadows of Earth.

These science fiction trappings are almost randomly introduced, and Fee’s alien appearance in his final scene might also be a commentary on Hwan Lee’s foreign point of view: chivalry and the European fairy tales are alien to him, so he cannot be swayed in the same fashion that Sancha’s brother can by the vestiges of chivalry in being confounded a second time by Viviane Morgan. Hinting that Fee is alien in nature may serve both a metaphorical and literal function, as the perceptions of the fay, which we shall call, for lack of a better word, a manifestation of romantic yearning, is highly individualized and subjective. Hwan Lee is characterized briefly as a resourceful, resilient, but quintessentially Chinese man, and the traditional gender roles in China forge a quite distinctive response to both Morgan and Fee, even

as he is suggested to be an alien. Northrop Frye is once again able to shed some light on this strange shift from myth and fairy stories to implied science fiction in *Castleview*:

What we have said about the return of irony to myth in tragic modes thus holds equally well for comic ones. Even popular literature appears to be slowly shifting its center of gravity from murder stories to science fiction – or at any rate a rapid growth of science fiction is certainly a fact about contemporary popular literature. ... [Science Fiction is] a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency to myth. (49)

As Wolfe explores the modernization of romance, subconsciously or, as I would argue, quite deliberately, he includes all of these romantic tropes in his novel, from Romantic poetry to fairy tales to modern science fiction, glossing over the immense changes in theme and mode over time while still stressing the universal need for idealization and desire on both a personal and societal level: King Arthur and what he represents are still timeless figures – merely change the setting and the surroundings and see romance and heroism spring to life once again.

While the actual cosmology of the floating fairy island appears simple, there still seems to be something odd going on with time and space throughout the novel. At several points, we are treated with a pattern in which two distinct pieces of glass are shattered, a character searches with a flashlight or for a light switch, and a firearm discharges. The first two breakages occur when Will Shields investigates the museum on Willow Street and his employee disappears. First an upstairs window is broken, separating the men, then a journal in a display case is stolen. Later, Sally Howard experiences a similar situation: her kitchen window downstairs is mysteriously broken (and she notices a “putrid stench ... had drifted in the hole in the window,” which dissipates (Wolfe, *Castleview* 106)), and Liam Fee breaks a mirror in her house upstairs at roughly the same time as the deputy fires twice at a strange, hairy apparition with glowing eyes

that Sally sees through her broken window (78). Still later, two shots are fired at Meadow Grass, one penetrating the girl Sancha's chest, the other shattering the windshield of Lisa Solomon's Cherokee (which she had to trade in when Lucie d'Carabas's payment was rejected – the vehicle was reintroduced into the story when Will Shields had to take another car from his dealership to explore the museum). During the car accident, Seth Howard actually goes through the windshield of the strange rusty vehicle which also seems to be a recurring symbol - a vehicle worn by the influence of rain and time. Readers never learn who fires the gun which so injures Sancha, but the events at Sally's house are presented out of order: Lucie appears there after her final disappearance from Ann Schindler's back seat, though she had already mentioned visiting the friend for whom she came into town. If space and time are truly being distorted, it is even possible that the bullets fired at the ape-like being outside (probably the creature which grabs Will Shields in the stable) might reach Meadow Grass, though by the end of the story everyone and their brothers (and cats) have guns, and Viviane Morgan is certainly capable of supplying her followers with firearms. More importantly, the implication of all this broken glass seems to point towards some great but murky significance.

At the conclusion of the novel, the true state of Jim Long frightens the vampiric remnants of Sancha away. He insists:

“[A] livin' man has got a soul, a spirit in him. One anyhow, an' maybe two or three. ... What you seen wasn't [Sancha], or anyhow not all of her, just the part that wants to stay alive no matter what. ... It wants to think it's the whole girl, see? So it'll ride a horse if it can, or maybe drive a car, and act like it was the real person, the body and everythin'. Only if somebody holds up a mirror to it, that makes it face up to what it is, and it'll skedaddle.” (252-3)

This broken glass might very well represent either the shattering of a mirror which reveals the truth, or the breaking of a barrier between the world of romance, idealization, and magic and the normal waking world. In one way, the romantic spirit involves the exploration of the individual and his or her self-definitions and desires, even positing a kind of self-invention. Whether the breaking of that glass is a denial or an acceptance of that inner state remains unclear, but it is in either case fraught with danger. This chapter shall return to this imagery to discuss the primary name of the mystical fay land given by King Geimhreadh: The Isle of Glass.

When Shields first explores the museum, he finds that one of the larger rooms was used by Dunstan's daughters to paint, featuring many large windows facing different directions. He looks at their handiwork, noting that each is distinct, and believes that the girls might have "perhaps received callers here." He also wonders if their artistic impressions of the castle indicate that they were "all seeing something nobody has ever seen anyplace but here, a unique thing" (33). In trying to rationalize the varying appearance of the castle, different in the number of towers and in color, he creates a model of its turrets and has Bob Roberts look at it from different points of view, eventually concluding that it must be moving. His model has six turrets, and there are six windows in the sitting room of Dunstan's daughters. At one point, Robert hears a scraping, assuming it is "Probably just a car going by" (35). When they examine the paper cylinders used to emulate the castle from different directions, "Somewhere nearby, glass broke with a crash as precipitate as an explosion" (36). Looking at a representation of the castle from multiple points of view precedes the first instance of shattered glass in the novel, and perhaps this is suggestive.

Shields attempt to create a model of the castle is not the only miniature representation in the museum. He soon comes upon a model of the city of Castleview itself:

When he pressed the switch, the floodlights in the ceiling revealed a model town: red brick and shiny black asphalt streets, tiny red and white houses flanked by bright green trees, a town as charming as a child's drawing. Castleview, of course. He chuckled softly at his own fears as he crouched to look beneath the big table that held the model. The shadowy space was empty of all but dust; and yet something stealthily walked, and there was a pervasive animal reek, faint but distinct, throughout this upper floor. (55)

Even though it has the charm of a child's drawing, just as the fairy land brings to life such flights of the imagination as G. Gordon Kitty, that ominous reek certainly resembles the stench accompanying the muddy apes sighted throughout the text, at Sally Howard's house wafting through her broken kitchen window, and again when Shields is attacked in the stables at Meadow Grass. Even in the museum, he later describes that he "wasn't actually alone, there was somebody in there with me, maybe more than one. Did I mention the carved wood? There were carved heads over the fireplaces in a lot of the rooms – tough-looking men, and women with smooth oval faces. It felt as though they were trying to talk, trying to warn me about something that was creeping up on me" (84). He describes the carvings as "all Malory. The sword in the stone was carved over the fireplace in the parlor, downstairs" (85). The foul stench he encounters on the upper floor is associated with the breaking glass: when Bob goes to investigate the broken window on the upper floor, he disappears, and only later will the glass display case downstairs be broken. Just as Shields convinces himself that he will find Bob dead, that second glass explosion occurs on the floor below, and later readers learn that the journal of Bob's ancestor was taken (55).

This is not the only room which seems to have a mysterious connection with the events in the novel. Fleeing from Fee much later in the novel, the young Judy somehow escapes the turret

window at her aunt's house (a room in which Mercedes imagined herself as a princess, in fact) and finds herself in another castle. She sees the Victorian house her aunt owns float "off like the bright toy boat she used to sail on the lake in the park. Between Aunt Sally's tower and this one were black waves, more waves and more water than Judy had ever seen" (172). On Judy's descent from the room, she encounters the figure of winter, King Geimhreadh, and a gargoyle transforms into an anthropomorphic manifestation of her cat, G. Gordon Kitty. If the castle truly is a *Morgana Fata*, then all of these struggles are encapsulated in the mysterious and feminine figure of Viviane Morgan, both nemesis and ally, who threatens death and promises resurrection, a true figure of idealized romance who teaches women to mature and to desire and serves as a kind of idealized object for the wild hunt of men.

At one point, Will Shields receives a prophetic message from a fortune cookie advising him to be careful near water. His wife's cookie tells her that she will save a king (100). The terrible weather in the city of Castlevue makes Will's task difficult, and the figure of Viviane Morgan is also intimately associated with both the rain and the bodies of water which seem to surround the mystical isle bizarrely intersecting the real world. When the idea of individuals seeing an oddly shifting castle first comes up, the real estate agent Joy Beggs calls it a *Fata Morgana*, or "Morgana the Fairy," as Shields translates (7). This association between the moving castle, the fairy figure of Arthurian myth, and the woman in white all synthesize into Viviane Morgan, both the complex character of legend and a symbol of whimsical romance in her own right. Much as in the development of Arthurian traditions, Morgan is an ambiguous figure. In myth and legend, she was initially simply a sorcerous figure who eventually attained a kind of moral indeterminacy, at times assisting Arthur, at times actively working for his destruction. In some legends, she is conflated with the Lady of the Lake and even the queens who take the

wounded Arthur to the Island of Avalon to recover. In Malory, Arthur's sister Queen Morgan sets up the almost heroic figure of Accolon to kill Arthur, actually giving him Excalibur to wield against the king (though Malory distinguishes between the Lady of the Lake, called Nynave, and Morgan, and in this encounter Nynave saves Arthur from certain defeat.) When Arthur is wounded, Morgan Le Fay travels far on horseback to take Excalibur once again, but finding it tight in his grasp, she only succeeds in stealing the scabbard – which reappears in the final scenes of *Castleview*. Indeed, the figures of women on horseback traveling through the Isle of Glass at the conclusion of the novel might directly echo Queen Morgan's legendary ride. In *Castleview*, it seems that all of these different roles have been synthesized into the ghostly woman in white, whose highway presence is more akin to an urban legend.

When we first meet Viviane Morgan in the novel, she is mourning the death of a raccoon and her kitten on the road. Though she is bent on Arthur's destruction, when she tries to teach Judy about the ongoing events, she is not shy in declaring her feelings for her brother:

“I [loved him]! ... Don't you know the legend of the three queens? Or the lady in the lake? Or the sword in the stone? ... Our father was merely a vulgar petty chieftain, one of those half-Christian Celts the Romans left in their wake like candy wrappers. His mother was a common duchess, but mine was a merrow. ... We are the Oceanids, descended of Tethys and Oceanus, and we live under the sea.” (244)

This descent from a mermaid utilizes the meaning of her original name in legend, Morgen, which means “sea-born.” The Oceanids, conceived of the incestuous union of Tethys and Oceanus, both deities of the sea, often served as the patron spirits of bodies of water, and Viviane Morgan also shares these qualities. Even older myths are invoked when she tells Judy that “to explain I would have to tell you much more – how three brothers drew lots for the four quarters of this world

from a helmet, and all that” (244). Here she is referring to the revolt of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades against the Titans and Cronus and the manner in which they determined dominion over the heavens, the underworld, and the sea.⁸ Quite interestingly, there is a kind of synthesis between Cronus's fate and the destiny of King Arthur; in ancient Britain, Plutarch notes a myth about a god over the water, which seems to be Cronus, imprisoned on an island guarded by the giant Briareus while he sleeps, surrounded by his attendants. While Morgan desires the triumph of winter in the form of King Geimhreadh, she is often described with spring-like and lively features: her “breath held the pensive sweetness of a spring morning” (58). During a strangely intimate and suggestive scene with Mercedes, her breath is commented on again as being “perfumed, as a garden ... after a warm rain. ... Ms. Morgan’s hand was on her thigh, stroking its soft flesh through the threadbare blue denim. A seam had given way for an inch or so; burning fingers found the spot and crept through” (62). It is at this point that their vehicle turns off the established road and enters the path to the fay lands, clearly equating this fecund passion with a world beyond the ordinary, reinforcing Viviane Morgan's cyclical function, facilitating both death and lust. By the end of the novel, she has clearly restated her role as the Lady of the Lake: “[W]hen [King Arthur] had lost his last battle, in drowned Leonnese where he was born, he sent [Excalibur] to me for safekeeping” (245).

At one point, she also proclaims herself still a creature of the sea and reaffirms the science fictional aspects of the tale:

⁸ Determined to never be supplanted by his son, Cronus ate his older children, which included Demeter, Hestia, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon. Later, Ann Schindler asks if there was a saint or god for cooks, and Shields mentions Martha and Hestia, the goddess of the hearth (Wolfe, *Castleview* 216).

I have many homes; some are under the sea, others beneath lakes. But I meant to tell you that when my brother was a babe, a meteorite with a sword through it fell white-hot to earth. As you probably know, there used to be another world beyond the one your people have named for your god of defence [sic]. She died long ago, and her people perished with her, most of them. This sword was their work. It had become partially encased in molten rock, I imagine. (245)

This suggestion of alien forces at work seems to be confirmed when Liam Fee is struck by Hwan Lee: “As night vanishes with the raising of a blind, Mr. Fee was gone. His clothing remained, but in that clothing was a large-headed being with three pairs of eyes and pipe-stem limbs” (262). Even before this, at the museum filled with the imagery from Malory, Shields notes that the largest carving was, “The sword in the stone, of course – the sword Arthur had drawn when no one else could, the sword that had made Arthur King of Britain. ... [S]urely there was - some connection he was not making” (113). Given the imagery of the black anvil, he wonders if it had fallen from the sky as “a sign of some sort from God” (113). He dismisses it as a meteorite, “clearly the gussied up history of a king in the Dark Ages who had gotten his throne by learning to extract meteoritic iron, from which weapons could be forged. Thus Arthur had in a very real sense drawn a sword from a stone that had fallen from the heavens” (113). The family name Dunstan, he imagines, is similarly based on this origin and a perceived lineage reaching towards King Arthur, implying “*dun-stone*, dark stone or black stone, as those things had been said in Scotland and in the borderlands along the northern edge of England” (114).

The ambivalent relationship Queen Morgan has with her brother continues in her attempt on the life of Arthur Dunstan. In the hospital, Mercedes sees Viviane whispering to Wrangler: “it seemed to Mercedes that they were taunts at times, and at others words of love” (156). This

corrosive aspect of her personality is perhaps personified in the wild weather that occurs when the fairy land is directly overhead, as the water surrounding it falls below. In bad weather, perhaps the castle is not seen as often because it is directly above, exerting its influence on the town below. The rusty sedan which continually reappears on the road, with its one headlight and its sinister association with the undead Jim Long, might have rusted from the influence of the fay weather. It is not, however, the only rusty object. When Judy is trapped in the tower in the room of strange, feminine candles, she notes that the bar across the door has rusted shut, and that the door's "big hinges were rusty too, rotting into a rough powder that blackened her thumb and stained her fingers orange, green, crimson, and violet" (173). This could very well denote the danger and trap-like nature of many romantic or magical allures. In this particular novel, the foul weather seems to represent that risk.

From the very opening chapter, when Tom Howard walks out into the nasty storm to his death, we are treated to a motif which never truly relents. "[T]he rain pounded him as well, drummed upon the shoulders of his yellow slicker, drove hard against the brim of his rubberized hat" (1). The prominent description of the jackets and hats which the characters use to defend themselves from the gathering storm stand out as an intentional pattern. When Seth sees Shields and his family, he insists that they leave their umbrellas in the hallway, but Joy Begg says they will be quite safe if they are left on the porch. The miscellaneous rain coats and plastic hoods almost seem to serve as a shield or perhaps even like the scabbard of Excalibur, insulating those who own them against the perilous forces represented by the terrible weather.

Shield's initial view of the castle through the grimy glass of the attic window occurs as "Rain drummed unceasingly on the roof." The sudden death of Tom Howard defeats their plans, and as they leave on the road, they encounter a sinister apparition: "The dark figure of a

horseman appeared on the road before them as though it had fallen with the rain” (10). The text immediately cuts to the real estate agent Joy Begg abandoning her soaking raincoat. Soon afterwards, Liam Fee will show up at her door offering to purchase the Howard estate for his growing congregation. Her motive in every action is to sell a house to the highest bidder so that she can make a profit. Clearly, she has no defense against the forces of Liam Fee, who knows exactly how to appeal to her. He is far less successful in dealing with others throughout the novel. When Shields gets back to the hotel, he can’t wait to return to his dealership (and get away from his wife, certainly, who believes they “ought to have” hit the man on the horse (13)). He leaves his raincoat in the closet when he goes. “A raincoat that had soaked through was not much protection, and the rain was letting up a little now, anyway” (11). Freed from his family, he begins to sing. Certainly, the soaked raincoat is tied to the condition of his marriage and perhaps even reflects on Ann Schindler and her abandonment of traditional roles. Later, when he and Bob Roberts intend to go to the museum, Roberts retrieves Lisa Solomon’s Cherokee for them to use. Roberts goes out to get the car, “[Will], [s]ince you haven’t got a coat ... maybe you could just tell me which one you want. I’ll get the keys and drive it around.” Roberts wears the black oilskin of farmers as protection against the rain (20). This chapter will not present every instance, but meticulous attention is paid to the defense each character has against the rain, and this culminates in the heavily insulated Phyllis Sun, who actually survives seeing the “single, blazing eye” of the huntsman in one of the book’s final scenes, though her purse and hat are torn from her and she is left soaked by the fierce storm.

Certainly, much of the rain must be falling from the water which surrounds the mysterious castle floating above, but what does it actually do? “Rain makes the road slick” (12). In addition, whenever the weather is bad, it seems that Arthur “Wrangler” Dunstan has much

more to fear for the property he oversees at Meadow Grass. The inhabitants of Castleview, especially the young ones, are prone to “ride in the rain – do any crazy thing” (13). When Seth comes to pick up Mercedes, who has been left unsupervised at the hotel, his football jacket is emphasized, and he is “standing outside in the rain” (23). He asserts, “They come in a lot closer in weather like this, right? They think we won’t see them. ... The people in the castle. There have to be people, right? It figures. They’re watching us” (43). Ann also receives a warning about the water before she finds the injured Arthur Dunstan, but she drives over it without fear. We will return to the relationship of Mercedes and Seth below, but clearly one of the dangers represented by the rain is to be lost in romantic abandon and to forget reason and self-control.

On her way to Meadow Grass for the first time, the radio warns Ann of flash floods on Old Penton Road, and a rusted sedan without lights passes her by (22). A buck steps in front of her path, and “for a fleeting instant the graceful buck had seemed an object of supernatural dread” (21). It could very well be that this buck is yet another manifestation of Viviane Morgan, perhaps the object of the hunt. When Rex von Madadh takes the widowed Sarah Howard to the hospital, he stops and smells the air, saying, “Rain has cleansed the air. ... Old smells are gone, and none but the new remain: your perfume, that dirty car, which has left its traces on our clothing; and these trees, weary for their winter sleep” (146). The traces of the old world are removed, and the seasonal theme of the novel is stated. The associations of winter as a senescent but still kindly old man belie the early despair voiced by one of Will's salesman: “Winter’s the worst season there is” (18).

King Geimhreadh’s name means winter, and it could very well be that his triumph signifies the dormancy of the god king (as already mentioned in passing, like the Phrygian stories of Cronus fleeing for rest to the Island of the Blessed). Ann is certain in her drive that the natural

world reacts according to need, and that “Nature reacts not only to physical disease, but to moral weakness: when danger increases, she gives courage” (22). However, she immediately turns this speculation into the plans for a cookbook which she will call *Cooking with Goethe* or *Cooking for Nature*, even as “an infant waterfall appeared out of the darkness far above her, tumbling down onto the already-drowned asphalt” (22). I will explore the possibly passionate and sexual metaphor of the weather and the cars on the highway soon, but the road is also characterized as a modern intruder onto a mystical and more natural past: “The road they drove was an intruder in the same way that the blade of a saw would have been an intruder, vulgarly revealing the secret, almost silent life of the trees” (43). While it is never clear, some of the imagery associated with the old rusted sedan which might have been Jim Long's car also mirrors the description of the giant atop Sleipnir: “A car was coming down from the scenic view, a silent old sedan with a single headlight, though at that moment that headlight seemed like the sun” (61). It is Phyllis Sun who survives the sight of the Green Man's single eye, after all, but this association is never truly clarified or developed in any obvious way. In any case, the rusty car becomes something of a trap to Mercedes and Seth, and they are involved in an accident which injures both of them, with Seth actually being thrown through the car's window.

Will Shields will also fall victim to a trap while they are being besieged by unseen forces at Meadow Grass. He frees a boy (who fears his flashlight) from an iron trap and is then immediately grabbed by a huge ape-like beast which reeks of death. His wife fulfills her fortune cookie for the second time by running over the beast (and her husband, though he seems to escape serious injury). The image of the child with his leg in a trap is actually a snare for Shields. In the world of magic and illusion, the senses cannot be trusted very far at all. However, von Madadh stresses that quite the opposite occurs when people are confronted with credible stories

of the supernatural and refuse to believe them, concluding that “most of the safety and sanity of our safe and sane little world depends upon our disbelieving anyone who doesn’t speak English” (196). He further challenges the rational and humanist tradition by stating, “only one [species] has developed sufficient intelligence to make tools and use fire. Do you find that plausible?” (199) Though Dr. von Madadh appears to be a distinguished and leonine man, the muddy paw print he leaves on Mercedes's hospital bed hints that he is quite different than he appears to be. Bob Roberts still concludes that in the final battle he was not an evil creature without virtue: “You don't send the worst at a time like that, Sally. You pick out your best, and von Madadh was the one they picked” (274-5). Many of the best things in life are necessarily colored by romantic impressions, and the loss of that childlike ability to imbue objects with a special and lasting significance is tragic, especially if that loss only hastens one into the stultifying and responsibility-filled world of modern adulthood.

Many of the relationships in *Castleview* highlight the struggle between the ideal and the real, and this same battle is writ large in the pursuit of the woman in white, Viviane Morgan, and the manifestation of the Wild Hunt and the Green Man, a symbol of fertility transformed into both foe and friend in Arthurian myth. When Mercedes first comes to the Howard house with her parents, Seth shows her the turret room, and, in true princess fashion, she imagines herself living there. Shields thinks about joking that she can have the room: “If you’re still a virgin, Merc” (8). Soon afterwards, Seth takes her on a ride and then slows the car before a low wall, which seems to rise from the almost ubiquitous rain.

The Olds crept toward the wall. Mercedes wondered how fast they would have to hit it to go right through and over the cliff she felt sure was on the other side. Hadn’t anybody ever done that? Seth wouldn’t, Seth was being careful – though not really as careful as

she would have liked – but what if she came up here sometime with somebody else? Maybe with somebody who was drunk or something. She pictured herself in another car, the old dark car she had seen beside the road, plunging over the cliff, down, down, down, until at last it hit the rocks and burst into flame. Some guy was in that car right now making out with some chick, Mercedes thought. Bet on it. (44)

Given that the road features the woman in white as a numinous threat to those who pick her up, like Jim Long, that Rex von Madadh, the champion of the Fay, soon becomes involved with the widowed Sarah Howard, that Lisa Solomon and Arthur “Wrangler” Dunstan are engaged to be married at the end of the novel, and that Will Shields winds up with Morgan, who refers to him as brother and lover, leaving the liberated Ann Schindler (who refuses to give up her name) to her own devices, the metaphor in this scene springs rather vividly to life. The wall, which Mercedes considers being smashed through in carelessness, seems to resonate with a hymen, with the car attaining a kind of Ballardian virility (or rapacity). As someone not yet sexually active, she wonders if others abandon themselves so easily and carelessly and plunge over a cliff from which there is no return. Almost all of the early action occurs on this road, and there is little reason to believe that its symbolic association would change. Meadow Grass, the camp for girls (featuring exotic ones from France, Brazil, and even Cleveland) has two gates, and it is under assault. When Ann Schindler shows up, Wrangler draws his gun on her in defense, forcing her to lock the gate. While she is not a true threat to the camp, many of her modern attitudes, presented routinely as selfish and almost petulantly childish by the text, indicate that her philosophy is antithetical to traditional gender roles for boys and girls (though she, too, thinks in binary terms about Mercedes’s behavior, remembering how she behaved as a young girl, suggesting that “girls will be girls”). In a final ironic twist, it seems that many girls are sent to Meadow Grass when

single parents find a new romance, to temporarily get the unwanted child out of their hair, as Sissy tells Judy: “[S]uppose when you’re a little older your mother gets a new boyfriend. She might send you to Meadow Grass” (221).

While there are many potential couples in the story, the budding relationship between Mercedes and Seth is the most prominent one explored in the text, and their narrative arc involves a protracted drive down the highway followed by a crash which leaves them in the hospital. The power of traditional wisdom and the magic of love and the life cycle handed down through fairy stories is made explicit in several key scenes, including the kiss between Mercedes and Seth:

They kissed, and it was not (as Mercedes had always heard it was supposed to be) before she knew what was happening. She knew perfectly well what was happening – that a whole world, new and strange, terrible yet wonderful, was unfolding for her. She understood, when their lips touched, exactly why Snow White and Sleeping Beauty had been awakened by a kiss, knew what those old grandmothers of eight hundred years ago had been trying to tell her, and knew that they *had* told her, their coded message coming clearly across the years, and that those dear old grandmothers – the bent crones at the firesides – had triumphed, their words not lost with the crackling of the sticks in their fires. That she and Seth or some other like Seth would someday ride on one white horse, laughing in the sunshine. (45-46)

This introduces another image, of the horse as domestic security and bliss. Later, as they are locked in a cell (before being released by G. Gordon Kitty), they share a meal together that is so idealized as to become almost sexual in nature:

[T]he wine was like a meadow in springtime. Every wildflower flourished there – buttercups and daisies, violets white or blue ... She knew them all. A wren trilled in her ears, and a wind from the south ruffled her hair. ... The cell spun about her; Seth was a bronze giant with eyes torn from a summer sky; the bandages were unworthy of his face ...she had never known how hungry she was, how hungry she had been all her life. She dipped a roll into the honey, and it was nectar and ambrosia. A key turned in the lock, which squeaked in climax. (242-3)

Of course, this imagery matches the weather in Castleview when the rain finally stops for a time: “Like a giant in golden armor, a Canadian high had driven off the wet and stormy low that had dominated the north-central area for nearly a week. Crystalline and visible, it stood guard above it now, so that the new day was born in sunshine” (201). At their initial encounter in the car, Mercedes and Seth are interrupted by Long Jim (who readers have already learned died over ten years ago after giving the mysterious woman in white a ride.) Mercedes can see him as he truly is when she closes her eyes: “He was as old as her father, ... and perhaps older; but a perfectly ordinary man until she shut her eyes. She kept them open, wide open, after she discovered that, staring sometimes at him, sometimes at Seth or the rain-wet trees” (47).

These visions are not the only ones she seems to have. At one point she remembers, probably from the influence of Morgan's sad, impossible tune, a black-bearded man with a horn and a boy blowing through a shell: “The shell was broken at the tip and had lost its color – she had not been interested” (129). In the vision, she leaves him, and the sound behind her “filled her with a horrible, forever-unsatisfied longing for something that was not woman, the bugling of a beast whose mates all were dead, whose consorts do not yet exist” (129). This masculine longing for the unattained is directly mirrored in the needs of Sally Howard and her sister Kate Roberts,

and it might even explain the goal of the Wild Hunt, which seeks so ceaselessly and destructively for its feminine prey.

Sally Howard continually notices that the ghost of her husband Tom still inhabits her house, either metaphorically as other men temporarily fill some of his roles or perhaps literally, given the other spirits we encounter in the story. Her sister suffers from a more broken relationship that immediately manifests itself when she enters the Howard residence: Kate's purposelessness prompts her to toy with the notion of suicide, and soon enough, when the Wild Hunt finds her, she actually shoots herself in the head, but not before her resentment for her sister surfaces: "Sally had gotten a good man who was crazy about her, or anyway had been while he was alive. ... Sally didn't really understand Seth at all; because Seth was a boy, would be a grown man the next time you looked, and who the hell understood *them*?" (182) Though she has not actually been drinking, she recognizes that her state of mind is actually that of an inebriated person: "I got blasted when Stanley split, and went to bed with that salesman, and now Judy's gone and I'm thinking drunk again" (182-3). Her concern for her daughter is definitely muted by her other worries: "Judy was gone. ... [Kate] thought about that in the same way she thought about Stan. It hadn't worked out, she and Stan. They had never quite fitted, and now Stan – now Stan's daughter – was gone. Kate really and sincerely hoped that the two of them would be happier out of her life than they had ever been in it, and it was nice to be able to start fresh" (182). Of course, her resolve to make that fresh start is extremely short-lived. Through the broken window, she sees a "big - ... enormous – man peering in. His face was bearded; above the black hairs his skin was a pale green. His eyes met hers, and at the shock her hand tightened convulsively" (185). While this is almost certainly the Green Man who rides Sleipnir, the description given here and at the conclusion of the story when Phyllis Sun peers into the singular

eye of a creature much more like Odin are different enough to make readers question why this particular manifestation features *two* (or at least plural) eyes. Later, Lucie and Boomer will encounter the spirit of Kate Roberts in the Fay lands, her cheeks bleeding and her hands “thorn-torn” as she calls out for her daughter Judy, finally putting a name to the unfulfilled need inscribed in her (204).

Clearly, Kate was not honest with herself about her emotional requirements while she was alive, but that gaping emptiness left in the loss of her daughter reveals her true concern when the other problems of life vanish. Sally is similarly lost throughout the novel, though her dreams are slightly more romantic “[I]t seemed to her that it had been only a year or so ago that [she and Tom] had met in American History. Lost in a waking dream, she recalled how Tom’s smile had lit up his eyes” (182). However, even before these reveries, it is quite clear that her goals are primarily focused in moving on: “She might (she would) find another man, a man who would take care of her and their home, and be a father to Seth” (104). These thoughts are amazingly quick in coming, considering that less than a full day has passed since her husband’s demise. (The funeral baked meats do not even have time to coldly furnish forth the marriage tables, and many of Sally’s internal monologues seem to want discourse of reason, as Hamlet might say, blinded by romance and hope.) Her casuistry is also on display when her dog Rexy reappears, causing her to drop her key, pistol, and cartridges quite carelessly in the lawn. “Suppose there had been another dog, a dog who looked a great deal like Rexy. *That* was certainly possible: half German shepherd and half Irish setter, Rexy had been born two blocks over, one of a sizable litter” (105). Almost immediately afterward, she finds that “Something lay in the bed, in Tom’s place” (107).

The names of Sally and her mother Sarah (which are occasionally interchangeable, though not often in modern usage) mean “princess.” Despite this obvious channeling of the fairy tale spirit in her character development, when Rex von Madadh begins speaking of the power of the Fay in the modern world, he notes that those strange beings can often impersonate other human beings, but also stresses that “every human being possesses the ability to change his appearance to a surprising degree” (226). He also notes that in the modern world, strange occurrences and eldritch sightings do not often involve extraordinary or wealthy individuals: “Here are no princesses – the persons are nearly always poor peasants” (226-7). Whether Sally Howard constitutes a genuine princess is up for debate, given Lucie's warning against opening the door to von Madadh (though she seems first and foremost be an ally of Fee, a potential but impotent rival). Sally had deferred to her husband's judgment in business matters, even though she seems to move on very quickly. The reappearance of her dog Rex, a name which means “king,” also resonates with the stories of Arthur's return as “the once and future king.” However, it does not seem that Rex von Madadh holds any of her husband's old spirit, despite the presence of the ghost she perceives from time to time in the house. Perhaps the ghost of her husband should be considered as a comforting masculine presence to be assumed by anyone who enters the house and acts protectively or possessively, as if they were auditioning for the role. Fee sleeps in her bed and the deputy acts to protect her, both taking up the same space as the supposed ghost without any awareness of it. Given the extreme rapidity with which Sally moves on, perhaps the most ideal mortal woman in the story is actually Lisa Solomon, who agrees to marry Arthur Dunstan and does not hesitate to leave the safety of her car to fight during the final hunt.

On the other hand, Ann Schindler might be more heroic and assertive than Sally while still being a “bad” wife. When Shields first hears the way that Lisa Solomon speaks to Arthur Dunstan, he is filled with a kind of envy: “Had there ever been a time when Ann had been so anxious to hear his voice? Yes, for a few months before their wedding, and a few months after it. It had ended when Ann found that she was carrying Merc, but he had hoped for a year or three that a certain cadence of Ann’s would eventually return. He knew now that it never would” (210). Though she certainly owns all of the modern kitchen gadgets, Ann collects recipes and creates clever cookbooks (based on the literary tradition which Will actually studied in school) without ever seeming to cook: Will cannot remember the last time that she actually made him a meal with love. Her parenting is also self-absorbed. She seeks to understand Mercedes by thinking about herself: “Mercedes only wanted to come when she knew she was not wanted. Hadn’t she herself been like that at Mercedes’s age? It was necessary, after all – it was precisely the things from which girls were excluded that girls had to learn if they were to become women” (12). One imagines that the didactic position of the novel, situated as it is amidst a chronicle of decaying romantic and traditional ideals and their collision with the modern world, presents Ann's attitude ironically.

We have already mentioned how the wall which protects Mercedes and Seth from a dangerous plunge assumes a kind of metaphorically sexual skein, and several other scenes in the novel also contain allegorical scenes which freely move between heavy-handed and bizarre. Almah Cosgriff brings a casserole over to the mourning Sally Howard which “smells absolutely heavenly” (86). While she gives Sally a hug, she sets the casserole on top of *Good Housekeeping*. Sally is also surprised by the knowledge Mrs. Cosgriff displays of her kitchen. That exact and unflinching ability to instantly perceive where another woman would keep her tea

and teapot can only be attributed to the competent wisdom of age and the universal nature (and “heavenly” import) of such domestic traditions. When Almah embraces Sally, the younger woman is reminded of her Grandma Chattes (87). Sally is also struck with the realization that all of the beautiful things of childhood and youth will fall to rags and perish, but her momentary disorientation, confusing Mrs. Cosgriff for her grandmother, is where the allegory attains weirdness. Despite her age, Almah as a first name implies a young woman or a virgin (and is quite famous for its use in the prophecy of the birth of the Messiah in the Book of Isaiah) and Cosgriff is a Gaelic name meaning “victorious,” while Chattes is of course a French term for cat. Alas, Chattes (or pussy cat) is easily and commonly used in the vulgar sense for female genitals in both English and French. In this case, Almah stands for an ancient tradition of strict gender roles and propriety, and her home-made food resonates with a mystical familial communion made explicit later in the novel (something denied Will Shields for what seems a long time). Moved by grief and other fantasies, Sally confuses her neighbor with another presence from her childhood, but one that seems to be associated with something far more sexually explicit and vulgar. Her need for material comfort and security is hopelessly entangled with sex and its baser aspects (beneath the charm, after all, Rex von Madadh might be a muddy and smelly dog or ape). Given the facts that Liam Fee also reminds her of a cat, that she thinks of her deceased husband as a “tomcat” who failed to land on his feet, and that Puss-in-Boots as G. Gordon Kitty will manifest anthropomorphic features by the end of this novel, her grandmother's name, just like Michael Daoine's, might actually be enough to speculate that Sally's ancestors could have been fay in nature. Her pull towards comfort and passion in this scene is metaphorically confused with her need for virtuous and maternal affection.

Even characters as ambiguous as Ann Schindler at times manifest a kind of traditional sensibility. When Sancha is wounded, Ann feels that common sense dictates “that the brassiere should have been discarded, too; but that the humiliation of naked breasts might in some way kill the wounded girl – though she would die anyway” (139). Just as each of Doctor Dunstan's daughters paints a different picture in the expression of her creativity (linked to the sitting room where suitors would have been entertained), all of the people in the novel express their romantic urges differently. Creativity cannot be truly killed, but it can be stripped of its magic and more whimsical fancies quite easily. The journalist who writes for *Castleview* is another, ordinary iteration of Viviane Morgan. The castle, identified as a *Morgana Fata*, is itself a kind of mirror. While on the plot level this is difficult to explain, as a symbolic representation of the stripping away of fancy and romance from prose over time it makes perfect sense. The fay Viviane Morgan, the embodiment of a dangerous and powerful magic, is still a reality, but the spare style of the modern world has reduced valid expression to the objective, utilitarian prose and reportage of fact associated with journalism and realism. The journalist's goal is to uncover the true story, and in this case that must involve Viviane Morgan. Even when dreams are quite ordinary and uninspired, hamstrung and crushed by the modern world, they are still real.

Of course, some of the most genuine monsters of the story might actually be the human characters who have turned their back on romance, and Wolfe's allusions help to highlight that there are some trolls lurking in *Castleview*. The play *Peer Gynt* is explicitly and perhaps erroneously mentioned when Shields hears the organ playing at the museum on Willow Street, at a point when his older employee, Bob Roberts, is seemingly abducted and vanishes, only to appear later at Meadow Grass:

His fingers groped along the wall, feeling only smooth oak paneling. The rain dripped from the eaves as before; but when a second or two had passed, the house was no longer weeping alone in the silence. An instrument with a voice as deep as an organ (though it was not really an organ) sobbed, too, its notes long and throbbing, reedy and infinitely sad. Hearing them, Shields froze. Seconds passed before he identified the melody. It was the “Valse Triste” from *Peer Gynt*. (53)

Ibsen’s play is based on an earlier fairy tale in which the hunter hero saves three dairy maids from a serpentine troll, called the Boyg, which impedes travelers. While the tune Shields perhaps mistakenly identifies as the “Valse Triste” probably refer to a movement from a different opera composed by Sibelius written for his brother-in-law's play *Kuolema* (translated as *Death*), Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* still bears some relevance to *Castleview*. Klaus van der Berg states of Ibsen's work: “its origins are romantic, but the play also anticipates the fragmentations of emerging Modernism” (684). This positioning between the romantic and modern world make it a perfect allusion for Wolfe’s novel. *Castleview* traces the effects of modern attitudes and degenerating traditions on people who are by their very nature still prone to flights of romance and fancy, and the situation at Meadow Grass, with its three young “maids” and the troll-like being which Shields finds as he explores the barn, bears more than a passing resemblance to the plot of *Peer Gynt*.

While the original fairy tale is perhaps more simplistic than Ibsen’s take, he believed that it held basis in fact. His exploration of the theme involves the problem of modern egoism and selfishness. The eponymous hero, with an overactive imagination illustrated in his tale of a reindeer hunt, spoils his chances of a good marriage with the daughter of the richest farmer in his community. At the wedding, he drinks heavily and runs off with the bride. Banished as a

consequence, in the mountains Gynt comes upon three maidens wooed by trolls. As a result of his drink, he is rendered unconscious and meets a green woman whose trollish father offers him the chance to become a troll if he will marry the girl, who claims to have conceived a child born of Gynt's mind. In Ibsen's version, the Boyg is a selfish voice of egoism, spurring Gynt to avoid direct responsibility. Later, in the waking world, a woman in green arrives with a boy she claims to be Gynt's child. Gynt escapes to earn his living in many dubious professions as he travels throughout the world. Eventually a wreck strips him of his possessions, and he faces judgment, questioning if he has ever been truly himself or simply acted as a selfish troll throughout his life.

In *Castleview*, The three girls at Meadow Grass probably resonate with the three maidens courted by trolls in *Peer Gynt*. The description of the camp for girls emphasizes its placement "in a valley that seemed separate from the rest of the world, [with] a big white barn and a red-roofed rambling fieldstone building" (30). The girls more or less abandoned there are the blonde Cecelia Stevenson from Cleveland, the dark Sancha Balanka from Rio, and the raven-haired Lucie d'Carabas (whose check seems to have bounced, putting Lisa Solomon in financial difficulty - she is opening the gate and courting the powers associated with water and rain in the story). Wolfe plays with fairy tales so often that it is worth taking a more critical look at the implications of his source material, from the eyes of another respected SF artist, Samuel R.

Delany:

The specific conventions of various traditional types of fantasy are simply too ethnically located to support, as a basal fantasy structure, the intraethnocism so much SF tries for: elves and fairies are too specifically Celtic; trolls and goblins too specifically Germanic; vampires, ghouls, and golems are too specifically middle-European. ...

Sword-and-sorcery begins as a specifically male escape from the coming responsibility of marriage, family, and a permanent home: for example, wife, children, job. Its purpose ... is to provide the adolescent male audience with a bigger, stronger man to identify with, who rescues the woman, beats up the villain, and who is loved briefly and allowed to leave without hassle.

Fairy tales – or fairy-tale plots – will simply not suffice for this: They are about nothing *but* the binding alliances formed between worthy young men and wealthy fathers-in-law, with docile daughters acting as the sign of the exchange of the paternal social position. ... In the traditional sword-and-sorcery tale, the hero is not the worthy prince, or even (in its Celtic version) the particularly clever proletarian or petit bourgeois seeking to marry into the aristocracy by replacing inherited wealth with brains; he is the barbarian, an outlander, a stranger. His prototype in the fairy tale is *not* the prince, but the troll whom the prince, journeying through the Great Bad Place, slays *en passant* on his way to the castle to receive his tasks. (Delany)

While Ann Schindler is far from the hero of a sword-and-sorcery tale, her yearning for independence from social traditions and conventions, even if she is presented selfishly from Will's point of view, actually resembles the more anti-heroic sword-and-sorcery figure (and thus the troll figure) that Delany discussed above: she acts to save her husband when she intuits that the troll-ape is there by running it (and her husband) over. She saves Arthur Dunstan by ignoring Lucie's warnings. Despite these actions, unromantic descriptions of her character abound, one of which involves Shields lying "in bed beside a snoring Ann" (Wolfe, *Castleview* 17). Her husband still harbors some thoughts of a sexual nature with her, but they emphasize her selfish needs: "Sex was always best when Ann had eaten a big dinner and was ready for sleep,

impossible when she was dieting. You couldn't have everything, Shields told himself" (112). When she has the chance, rather than share as Mercedes and Seth do in the tower meal, she pounces on food: "In a trice [the last pot-sticker] was on her plate" (80).

This greed is also coupled with the certainty that she is almost always correct, and that she fully understands the nature of reality. During their conversation at the Golden Dragon, Ann and her husband discuss the vision of the castle, and she quickly questions its validity: "As Mercedes says, get real. You saw the castle? ... [I]t was an illusion" (80-1). Will knows that nothing he says can sway her: "Shields opened his mouth and closed it again. There was no means by which Ann could be made to understand what he wanted to say, ever" (81). Just as he will require saving from the troll when Ann arrives, in this scene, "[Shields] was saved by the arrival of their waiter" (81). Both the waiter and Ann are actually unintentionally dangerous figures, and this is not their only connection. When the waiter attacks Arthur Dunstan in a failed assassination attempt later, he tries to use a boning knife. Mercedes immediately recognizes it because her mother has one: "It's for taking the bones out of capons – stuff like that" (163). Deboning a castrated rooster has a certain kind of emasculating ring to it. Hwan Lee destroys the incompetently chivalrous brother of Sancha (whom we have already identified as a stand in for the wounded Fisher King of Arthurian myth) because he is not weakened by useless chivalry. Similarly, Will Shields is ineffective against Ann because he simply doesn't mean very much to her in her self-absorption.⁹

⁹ The text does make clear that this is something of a two-way street, however: at one point, Ann claims he never notices anything about anyone unless he is trying to sell them a car, and his initial mercenary reaction to the men working for him at the car dealership is to get rid of both of them and hire a woman, with him taking the other man's place on the sales floor.

Even with these “negative” traits, Ann acts decisively at several key points, though at the finale it is still Will Shields who advances without conscience volition to serve as the champion of humanity. While the plot of *Peer Gynt* may not directly relate to the story, selfishness and egoism are certainly implied in most of her actions. Her love for Shields is only expressed when he does something for her. The assault on Meadow Grass, which would seem to be orchestrated by the amoral fay forces at work, might just as easily be instigated by bored, dissatisfied youths from the town inspired by a longing to do *something*, anything, to break up the monotony of life, and the fairy and elf tradition often highlights that they are merely mischievous rather than eternally malevolent. Shields is quick to assert that the ape-like being that almost crushed him actually *was* a troll: “I met a troll, Mercedes. Met – hell, I wrestled one. Your mother hit us both with an old Jeep Cherokee. The troll had its back to her, so she couldn’t see me, or at least I hope she couldn’t” (199).

Once again, this scene has the hallmark of allegory. Shields falls into the trap of removing a young fearful boy from, appropriately, a trap, and in so doing finds himself caught in the arms of the ape, squeezing the life out of him. Ann manages, using her car, to burst through the stable and free Shields, fulfilling the prophecy of her fortune cookie for perhaps the second time (the first time she found Arthur “Wrangler” Dunstan unconscious in the woods and brought him to medical attention). Even so, she fails to see Will Shields and runs him over, believing herself to be a conquering hero. Yet on a more metaphorical level, the arms that squeeze Shields so tightly, wringing out romance and financial resources with selfishness, belong to Ann Schindler herself. The Boyg in *Peer Gynt* proclaims itself, “myself!” Similarly, Ann Schindler insists that she has a right to what is hers: “I have a right to my own name” (94). When he sends his car to Ann, she says, “I love you very, very much” and hangs up right away (19). She

demands the house: “This is my money, Willie – mostly mine, anyway – and I want that house” (10). Sally Howard, by contrast, defers to her husband’s desires, even though he is not present: “It’s not up to me [if we accept the offer and sell the house]. Tom will have to decide” (7). Later, when Shields returns his wife to the hotel before going to his dealership, he is anxious to leave Ann behind, and she seems just as eager to be free of her husband: “Mercedes can watch TV just as well with you gone. And I can readjust as well – better. Did you like that Chinese place where we ate last night?” (11). As he leaves, he realizes that he takes slightly too long to “[remember] to add, ‘Darling’” to his farewell. The troll whose arms he must escape is in fact his wife, and perhaps her claim that he does not pay any attention to anyone who does not serve his needs is yet another diagnosis of herself. It is only after he frees the fearful boy (both a diversion of the fay forces and a metaphorical representative of Will himself) and Ann runs him over that Shields finally stands up to her in his resolve to return the Cherokee to Lisa Solomon as soon as possible: “Ann, shut the hell up” (169). The arms of the troll are no longer squeezing the life out of him.

While *Peer Gynt* has more obvious relevance to *Castleview*, the “Valse Triste” is actually famous from the play *Death*. The main character’s mother is ill and has a dream of dancing, before Death comes to knock on her door in the form of her late husband. The second act features her son coming across the cottage of a witch who gives him a ring that allows him to see his future bride. Years later, he perishes in a fire, and sees the ghost of his mother holding a scythe, welcoming him to the land of death. While Sally Howards survives the events of *Castleview*, she does perceive the ghostly echo of her scarcely mourned husband in her house at several points. All those who die, to the living, exist most strongly in the realm of memory and imagination. The “death” Will Shields endures frees him from his marriage, though only Ann

could actually release Shields from the trollish grasp squeezing the life from him. At the culmination of the story, he is left to breathe a more rarified, romantic air.

This tense survival of romance even extends to the manner in which the characters in the novel make their livings. At one point, Will Shields jokes that his cars and his dealership are not truly his: they belong to the bank. Once again, the old feudal system has been transformed without actually being destroyed. Robert's grandfather, Doc Dunstan, built the house which became the museum on Willow Street. He was a Wells Fargo man who believed that the castle "was rocks out in Arizona. A mesa, he called it" (26). Coincidentally or not, a mesa in Spanish is a table, and thus we see the metaphor of King Arthur's round table brought to life with local color: Will Shields works to put food on his own table by using the tools which the bank permits him to own, and the structure commemorating lofty ideals and knightly, chivalrous behavior was constructed by a man who helped establish the banks that currently own almost everything, making Shields something of a champion for their interests.

When he decides to take Lisa's Cherokee from the lot to find out about the castle, he gets a flash of insight: "[I]nsanely, Shields felt that he had been standing before the gate of a fortress. This gray-haired man – an old squire or a master-at-arms, perhaps a master-of-horse – had just led up the charger he was to ride. And it was not young and elegant, or even very clean, but a big, rough, rust-colored stallion with flashing eyes" (21). If the Cherokee represents the vehicle of those knightly ideals, Will is not the only driver. Leonard Robert Roberts drives it first, leaving the keys in the ignition for Will to pick up later. In addition, when the need for quick action arises, there is "another set [of keys] up in Wrangler's room" (170). Just as the car embodies the accoutrement and agency of a noble knight, there is more than one representative capable of wielding the title, for in this case the power vested in Arthur's descendants is almost

universal. Even Tom Howard had a “skeleton” key which his wife attempts to carry with her after his death. Any and perhaps all of them might have served as champion to take up the omnipresent human heritage of mystery and responsibility. If cars are somehow related to the vestige of a masculine knightly past, Wolfe does not neglect to incorporate a traditionally female enterprise into the novel, and this often serves to bring people into a community.

Oddly, the transcendent communion Seth and Mercedes share while held captive within the fairy version of the castle involves food and a romanticized description of it. When Dr. Rex von Madadh appears most charming, he is preparing food for Sally Howard, and even Ann Schindler invests cooking with an almost religious significance, couching her “rosary” in terms of a complicated recipe for cheesecake. Similarly, the elderly couple who warn her of the lady in white and the black rider, as well as letting her know about Meadow Grass, are famous for Emily's contest-winning pear jelly. We will assume that this pattern lends some significance to the very process of food preparation, given that the assassin sent to kill Arthur Dunstan is a waiter in the Golden Dragon, where the males are quite protective of the kitchen, refusing to allow Phyllis Sun in the kitchen.

The symbolism of the Golden Dragon for Chinese culture should at least be glossed over, for while Hwan has seen *something* in Castleview, he is described quite differently than the assimilated Phyllis Sun; she does not know more than a few words of Chinese. Much as the legend of King Arthur (as Wolfe uses it in the novel) suggests that these European characters all share his blood line, the myths of China posit the dragon as a powerful and magical ancestor to other animals. It is an amalgamation of fierce beasts, with parts from deer, tigers, crocodiles, and

even the eyes of a demon. Most importantly, Chinese dragons are closely associated with water, including rivers, seas, and waterfalls, as Viviane Morgan is.¹⁰

Whether her exclusion from the kitchen has anything to do with Phyllis Sun's luck in surviving the gaze of Sleipnir's rider, Ann Schindler has some unusual, contradictory uses for her recipes. She recites them as prayers even as she exploits them for profit by tying them to a particular literary or historical tradition. In her everyday life, she never seems to cook for her family and has little use for traditional conventions. Even her random prayers, however, seem to have some relevance. In the chapter entitled "Rosary Cheesecake," her recipe requires "three tablespoons of White King Arthur flour," and "two egg yolks. You have to throw away the whites, or find something else to do with them" (187). Given Will Shields association with King Arthur, and perhaps the parallel use of the term "white," while he might once have been necessary to her in engendering a family, after the egg is hatched and the yolk consumed, the protective albumin has no further use, and her treatment of Will after Mercedes is born reflects this. Luckily, Viviane Morgan still has a use for those egg whites. Some of Ann's other food observations might be applied to human beings as well: "the reason California oranges are different, less mess, is the climate; they're really the same variety" (83). Humans, too, might initially seem very different due to variations in climate, soil, and generation, but under the right conditions the heroism of King Arthur and the nobility he represented can be reborn once again. This attitude towards the universal structures of the human mind is firmly ensconced in Wolfe's fiction, and it will also be important to *The Wizard Knight*. Food is one of the most basic universal needs that all human beings share, regardless of culture and gender.

¹⁰ Whether a coincidence or not, dragons in Chinese are known as "Long," and one translation for a golden dragon might be Jīnsè jù lóng, which bears some resemblance to the name of Jim Long, who haunts the highway.

Will dwells on food as a lost comfort and pleasure from the past: “Had he really had lunch at some other restaurant with Ann and Merc before driving to the real estate agency?” (79) He remembers pancakes, but he also realizes that had been “whole centuries before; and the cereals had been served by his mother, quick breakfasts before school. Breakfast? ‘An equal time hath shoveled it / ‘neath the wrack of Greece and Rome. / Neither wait we any more / That worn sail which Argo bore” (79). This verse is from Kipling’s poem, “A Song of Travel,” which asks where all of the ancient myths and legends have gone: “[W]here’s the lamp that Hero lit / Once to call Leander home?” The loss of vitality as time passes proceeds towards nothingness: “Dust and dust of ashes close / All the Vestal Virgin’s care; / And the oldest altar shows / But an older darkness there. / Age-encamped Oblivion / Tenteth every light that shone.” However, the poem concludes with the human attempt to fight this obscured, forgotten fate, which all must face alike: “By our Arts do we create / That which Time himself devours - / Such machines as well may run / ‘Gainst the Horses of the Sun.” Humanity struggles to forge a new and lasting home immune to the destruction of time, even if it is but a monument from the past. While Ann has allowed her interest in food to become both commercialized and emasculating, the communion which Seth and Mercedes develop through sharing the food in the tower is transcendent. The verbiage there promises a return to lost but more importantly *shared* dreams, bringing to fruition the promise of new life and growth.

In closing this analysis of *Castleview*, it is appropriate to once again emphasize how syncretic Wolfe’s approach can be. In “A Second View of *Castleview*,” Joe Christopher notes that the moving castle describes “the traditional Celtic isle of the dead – laid, as is often the case, to the west of the Celtic lands. ... The fact that this island lies in an ocean in its supernatural world explains the scene in which a human, Judy, on the island sees waves between her and her

home” (68). He also notes that this island, set in fairy, “is a heavily wooded land” when it is most expanded. However, one does not necessarily have to cross over any body of water to get there, even though Lucie's horse certainly drinks from a stream on the way there. Judy Youngberg is able to reach it by leaving the turret window of the Howard residence in her flight from Fee, winding up in the floating castle of the other world. Christopher also notes:

In the medieval Welsh poem “The Spoils of Annwfn,” which tells of King Arthur’s ship-journey to the supernatural island, the repetition of the name of the island emphasizes the word *caer*, which is used in Welsh for a hill fort, a Roman fort, or a castle. . . . One of the terms for the dwelling in the poem is *Caer Wydr*, which translates as the Fortress of Glass. . . . A character living in the castle [King Geimhreadh, the personification of winter] in Wolfe’s book identifies his locale as “the Isle of Glass,” which is “west of Ireland.” . . . The identification of the Isle of Glass with the Fortress of Glass, as seems likely, confirms this island and castle as the Celtic realm of the dead. Further, in “The Spoils of Annwfn,” another of the terms used is *Caer Siddi*, the fortress of the fairies. . . . As another character in the novel points out, there is a traditional, “confusing connection between [fairies] and the spirits of the dead.” (Christopher 68-9)

Most Arthurians will no doubt note the title of the final chapter, “The Land of Apples,” though Christopher does not mention that this is Avalon, the Island of Apples, where Arthur will be healed for his future return. These apples are granted an even heavier Christian symbolism in Wolfe's hand, as he freely syncretizes even Hestia and Saint Martha, the sister of Lazarus in Ann's recipe-filled thoughts, as she considers an olive tree that “Lazarus had cut down the year before, the old apple. Feeding the harvesters . . . press the mixture into a spring-form cake pan” (Wolfe, *Castleview* 216). The cutting down of this olive tree is mirrored in the final beheading of

the Green Man, when, “Green-faced beneath – then above – its olive hair, the giant's head tumbled over the stones to rest beside his helm. It had not yet ceased to roll when the first snowflakes fell” (273). Even if harvest and then winter must come, the return to spring is of course the goal of all of these proceedings; Lazarus, too, is a symbol of resurrection. In addition to being both the Isle of Glass and Avalon (and perhaps even a metaphorical form of Morgan Le Fay herself), one more fairy association with the island is almost certainly intended.

As noted previously, von Madadh's employment with the Daoine institutue refers to the Daoine Sidhe, the divine folk of Irish lore who supplanted the Tuatha De Danann and live in hollow mounds. Some legends also attribute three fairy queens to them, further highlighting the close relationship between Arthurian legends and Celtic myth. The Daoine Sidhe hunt, fight, and steal children. However, the Tuatha De Danann, the earlier race of magical gods, traveled to Ireland on a large cloud, defeating the Firbolg and giant Fomorians in their conquest of the islands. Tír na nÓg is another mythical island west of Ireland, and the Sidhe are also reputed to have given their advanced smith skills to mortals in a story which resonates with the legends of Prometheus. The island of Tír na nÓg is the “Land of the Young,” where youth, beauty, and health are everlasting. In the most famous story of Tír na nÓg, the woman Niamh brings the human Oisín to the realm on a magical horse, where he does not age. The floating stronghold on the Isle of Glass, surrounded by water, rain or not, has mixed all of these stories, becoming Avalon, where Arthur went to recover from his wounds, and Tír na nÓg as well, given its attraction to the young: Lucie, Sissy, Mercedes, Seth, Judy, and Sancha all wind up there in the final scenes, and the adults are forced to come rescue them. Even the stories of Cronus and his healing sleep involve the mystical Islands of the Blessed, completing the synthesis. The Islands of the Blessed are also mentioned in Wolfe's more or less contemporary short story, “The

Haunted Boardinghouse,” insuring that they were indeed in his sights during the writing of this novel.

If there is a didactic lesson in the sudden disappearance of all of the younger characters from *Castleview* (whether lured away by the figure of Rex von Madadh or chased by Liam Fee), it probably has something to do with acquired life experience and wisdom. For example, Judy's immature self-recriminations are married to fear. When Fee chases her, she feels she can deal with her problems if her mother is not involved, “knowing that running to her [mother] would only bring more trouble. (Judy had made Daddy leave, she knew she had)” (162). The adults who are completely motivated by reason and modern attitudes, such as the real estate agent Joy Beggs (considering Tom Howard's death purely for its impact on selling a house), are not privy to that kind of youthful fancy: “[T]hey say you can see a castle in the distance, sometimes, just at sunset. I have to admit *I've* never seen it, and I've lived here seventeen years plus” (6). Joy is an unromantic creature of the modern world motivated primarily by financial gain. Conversely, the old couple who operate the Red Stove Inn have never seen the tempting woman in white, but their mature and nurturing relationship, in which Alfred (whose name means “elf counsel”) pushes Emily's wheelchair indicates that they have probably created a fulfilling life free from temptation in their old age.

The encroachment of the supernatural into the world of the living (beyond the long-standing stories of the woman in white constantly lurking along the highway) involves the arrival of Liam Fee, who is determined to own the Howard house. When he tries to purchase the property by leaving a check for the asking price, we discover that “Tom didn't want to sell it, not really” (152). This reluctance to sell might have cost him his life. In attempting to rationalize exactly what Liam Fee is (though the breaking of a mirror upon seeing himself might seem a

natural precaution for a vampire, it also resonates with the breaking of the glass in the museum, the breaking of the windshield through which Seth plunges in his accident, and the shattered window of the Cherokee during the assault on Meadow Grass), readers should also consider his name. Oddly enough, Liam is a shortened version of William, meaning a defender or denoting a helm. As a surname, Fee can be derived from the Irish for “raven.” If Rex von Madadh represents the best that the fairy world has to offer, then Fee would seem to be its more closed and secret part – perhaps even a mirror image of the waking world, set free to reap a kind of incompetent havoc. Later developments suggest that he and others like him are all that is left of the alien civilization which indirectly led to Arthur’s ascendance. More metaphorically, the old superstitions and beliefs he represents have become completely foreign to the modern world, though unlike von Madadh, Fee seems well-suited to exploit base instincts like greed and fear. The close relationship between the names Will and Liam do not actually suggest a relationship, even if both attempt to gain the Howard residence, but they do suggest that Liam intends to attain dominion as champion and owner of the Howard house. In his first introduction, he declares himself an archdeacon of a faith which does not worship the Jewish God (32). Later, von Madadh discusses the aims of the Daoine Institute and brings up the people who cling to older beliefs, like those “in Ireland who still believe in leprechauns and banshees” (195). He says, “The Fairy Faith was widespread in western Ireland at the time [Michael Daoine] was growing up; his parents had been believers, and several relative had actually had brushes with the fairies, or at least claimed to have had them” (195). The possibility that the two worlds might have interbred also exists, as suggested by Michael’s last name. All of the houses in the story, from the tower of Geimhreadh to the museum on Willow Street, might also be connected, extensions

of the supernatural into the ordinary world, part of the magical construction hinted at by the occupation of the contractor Michael Daoine.

The universal aspects of these miscellaneous creatures are also stressed at several points. When Geimhreadh sees Judy's cat, who then chooses to stay with him, he says "at night all cats are gray ... That's a fine omen you bring us, friend: good planting, and a harvest. See, child, how he plants the corn" (220). Though the original saying implies that in the dark the appearance of a given woman doesn't matter, it also emphasizes the strange ambiguity in the mythical figures running across the pages of *Castleview*. The figures of romance, both good and bad, may at times have selfish motives, but having that glamour and purpose, the novel suggests, fulfills a deep-seated need inside everyone. The ordinary, waking world is never enough if humans try to approach it from the point of view of materialistic monism, for everything is composed of much more than its fragile, dying body. The Isle of Glass and its inhabitants are a reflection and a part of *Castleview* which cannot be kept separate forever. As Roberts learns from his wartime experiences, after hearing so much about Germany, "When I got there, I found out it wasn't Germany at all. They called it *Deutschland*, and they were Deutsch. Germany wasn't any real place. It was just like fairyland" (275). Yet that imaginary world has great power, too, even if everyone who looks at it sees it quite differently, for it still shows observers something about themselves. As Liam Fee says after attacking the mirror upstairs, "[H]e was merely my own reflection. I've broken a mirror, I fear, and that means seven years of bad luck" (89).

Even so, readers are left wondering if Sally Howard's union with Rex von Madadh represents the best outcome. When she looks upon her husband's body, before von Madadh walks off singing his doleful tune, she realizes, "If we are but mortal, Tom had been destroyed and was no more; if immortal, he was somewhere else. Those truths were clear to her now as

they had never been before” (218). Bob Roberts characterizes those who abducted him as morally ambiguous children looking for entertainment (“or anyhow they looked like kids”) emphasizing their relative irresponsibility: “They weren’t all of them kids. But they were always sort of messing around, messing with this and that, and showing each other things. . . . So if they had a gun and saw somebody standing out there, they might try a couple of shots. Or not” (143). Even though Rex von Madadh does not mention the name of Jesus, he is capable of quoting him while he prepares Sally's meal: “[T]he laborer is worthy of his hire, as whoosis says” (202). Perhaps the book which sits beneath Excalibur in Viviane Morgan's cabinet is the same book stolen from the museum. Conceivably, that journal records the intersection and survival of a union between the fay world and the mundane one that is mirrored in the relationship of von Madadh and his princess Sally. Mercedes picks that book up, and the magical way she views Seth during their selfless and transcendent meal, while locked in the tower, might also suggest that one does not have to be a fairy to experience something magical.

By the conclusion of the novel, the everyday world collapses into the world of romance, and the people of Castlevue must hope to navigate the border between two vastly different realities. Even if the attitudes towards fantasy and the paradigms of romance change form beyond recognition, those archetypes are still real and discoverable, calling men and women to action, love, and self-awareness while at the same time denying that what humans see is everything that there is to the world. In *Castlevue*, life and hope continue even in the face of death, and spring follows winter once again. This theme helps contextualize many of the odd narrative strategies that Wolfe employs in what is almost universally considered an impenetrable novel. Indeed, we might be reminded that critic John Clute condemned “simplistic theme criticism” in his assessment of Wolfe, which I included at the very start of this project, but in the

case of *Castleview*, the plot elements make little overall sense until we define the romantic theme.

However, in addition to unifying his work around a particular theme, Wolfe also often employs a subtext that some readers might call Gnostic in nature, in which the story seems to be one thing on the surface, and, upon closer scrutiny, actually transforms into something else entirely. Wolfe's second great attempt at Arthuriana is much closer to this model: a palimpsest in which the world of the senses might be deceptive even as those perceptions are somehow still "true." *The Wizard Knight*, composed of two volumes published in 2004, seems to be a portal fantasy in which the first-person narrator, a young boy called Able, somehow winds up being transported from a cabin in the woods in the contemporary United States to a fantasy realm featuring giants, aelf, and cognates of the Norse gods. There, he is transformed into a grown man, accepted as the brother of a much older recluse named Bold Berthold, and becomes a true hero over time. The aelf of the lower realm send Able with a message for King Arnthor, who rules Mythgarthr, the world equivalent to Midgard in Norse Myth. Human worship has been improperly directed downward rather than upward, and the imbalance this promotes has allowed forces such as those led by Arnthor's half-brother Setr from Muspelheim (based on the catalyst for Ragnarök from Norse myth, Surtr) to ascend the worlds and take control of Aelfrice. Arnthor is also dealing with an encroachment of giants from the north, led by King Gilling, and seeks to placate them through a mutually beneficial marriage with one of his baron's daughters, Idnn, also a figure from Norse myth, associated with the immortality of the gods. In addition, Arnthor's Celidon faces a cannibal Osterling invasion from the sea. Mythgarthr is beset from multiple fronts, physically and metaphysically. By the end of the series, its resources will be stretched to the breaking point and famine will have spread throughout the land. This snapshot of the work

neither describes its strangeness nor the touching subtext that lurks beneath the story, visible in the many dream sequences which punctuate the series.

Before approaching an analysis of the novel, I would like to present a review which unearths some of the purportedly problematic aspects of the tale. Professor Stephen Frug from Cornell University notes:

It's hard to criticize Wolfe, though, because of his reputation as a trickster: if you present a negative opinion of anything the man writes, you instantly lay yourself open to the charge that you just didn't get it. And not infrequently the charge will be valid. But it won't always be valid: Wolfe is human, humans are imperfect, and even Shakespeare wrote some clunkers. And while a lot of aspects of Wolfe's fiction are far more complex than they appear even at third glance, other aspects are, finally, not: they are straightforward, despite the efforts of Wolfe's more serious fans (an overlapping but not identical group to Wolfe's more serious readers) to try and make them so.

And, for me at least, it's even more intimidating when the backs of the books are filled with breathless praise from some of my *other* favorite writers: Neil Gaiman! Kim Stanley Robinson! Everyone seems to agree that this is the very best book since Wolfe's last very best book, and you just *have* to love it!

Well, I didn't. I liked it, but also had some real problems with it. So at the risk of derision for missing the point, I'm going to begin with some straightforward critiques of a writer who (in John Clute's apt words) "has never in his life told a straightforward tale".

Frug goes on to criticize the pace of the series, finding the first half to be slow, though he admits to finding the second volume more gripping, though seemingly rushed. He also notes:

Wolfe's uneven pacing is actually habitual for him -- there are traces of it in *The Book of the New Sun*, and it's a more serious problem in *The Book of the Long Sun*. And at this point I'm coming around to the belief that while this is partly due to careful authorial craft, it is also partly a failure of it: Wolfe simply gets too wrapped up in the early stages of some of his adventures and tells them at (at times) tedious length.

Wolfe, as has been frequently noted, writes puzzles, works which hint at stories and cosmology and theology which are only partly and obscurely visible on the surface. But he also writes (and clearly likes to write and, from what he's said of his reading tastes, likes) adventure stories which form the surface under which those puzzles move. And while Wolfe is a genius at writing puzzles, he is, I think, uneven at writing adventures. He likes it more than he's good at it. And I find that my favorite Wolfe works are often those where he doesn't try -- in his short stories, for instance, in which he is often simply doing something else.

There are a lot of interpretive puzzles in *The Wizard Knight*, as there are in all of Wolfe's work. Some of them I got the first time around. Others I didn't; still others I probably even missed the existence of. And I feel that if I reread it -- particularly, if I reread it right now, with the first reading fresh in my mind -- I would probably get a lot more of them -- might understand, to pick one example out of many, what the complex relationship between Mythgarthr and America was supposed to be, a relationship (along with the relationship of parallel or crossing characters) which Wolfe hinted a lot about but did not make clear -- at least to me -- on the first reading.

But, frankly, I didn't *like* it enough to want to reread it -- certainly not now. (Other Wolfe works I have liked enough to reread them, whether I found time to or not.) I'd rather read

something else -- even something else of Wolfe's. Wolfe's puzzles are marvelous, but if the supporting structure isn't good enough, I don't want to take the time to figure them out. And at least in the case of *The Wizard Knight*, I didn't.

This is a fair criticism of the text. One of the concessions I am entirely willing to make is that the fiction of Gene Wolfe written after 2000 is likely to subordinate the surface story to the subtext.

There are other stylistic criticisms which Frug notes that I will soon try to explain, but his thematic concerns are the most important observation, and one that he is not alone in making.

Frug also states:

I think Wolfe's writing of Able's voice was profoundly uneven. Usually in a high and archaic register, it would lapse at times into slang -- into (to my ear) outdated slang, slang that uneasily mixed contemporary life (macs) with some sort of parody of fifties usage (swell!). The slang itself was jarringly inconsistent; and the mixture of slang into otherwise unbroken pages of high-register speech (both dialogue and the narrator's voice) was frequently awkward in the extreme. Wolfe has said in an interview that he didn't have any trouble writing a modern teenager, since he knows them and lives near them; but I think there was a real failure of tone here. Now, maybe, this is all part of some complex Wolfean trick, some deliberate mixture of tone which served some thematic, portraiture or other purpose... but I sure didn't see it. Until someone convinces me otherwise, I think this is simply a failure on his part.

As Frug predicted, I will attempt to reconcile the jarring dissonance between fifties jargon and the existence of Macintosh computers below, as the subtext actually does provide a mechanism for the mixing of multiple generations in one narrative of the collective unconscious. Frug's

reaction is not entirely negative, but after praising the mixing of Norse mythology with the fantastic elements of the book, he returns to his central criticisms:

But I think my biggest complaint -- my biggest stumbling block -- was a pair of intertwined issues: the character of Able, and the ethics (even, politics) of the book. First off, I found Able frequently insufferable. Pompous, self-righteous, frequently a bully, he also came off as a Mary Sue (at least in one sense of that polyvalent term of fan critique): not only was he the most courageous and noble person about, but he also had the writer stacking the deck for him at every turn. He had more magical allies, artifacts, assistants, companions, than you could shake a stick at: an invisible ogre doing his bidding! A sky-wolf who happened to be totally loyal! Elves (called Aelf) who were his slaves (yes, not always reliable, but often enough). A magic sword, the blessing and friendship of Odin, various other magic devices he got at the end (the helmet, another sword). Heck, he even *becomes a god* halfway through the work! Talk about favoritism! This sort of stacking the deck is hard enough to take when the writer has some self-consciousness about what he's doing, but I didn't see any sign that Wolfe did. He simply loved his creation, and showered him with so many cheats and advantages that any honor he might have accrued felt like a cheat.

Able adjusted with damning speed to the hierarchy of a medieval society. Here his American origins were least convincing, if not downright morally foul. It's natural for those raised in a profoundly hierarchical society to accept it as normal, to expect deference from the lower-born and give it to the higher. But it's inexplicable for an American -- even an American boy. It makes Able seem like a deeply immoral man -- in a way that no one else in the novel seems immoral, since after all, no one else in the

novel ought to have a cultural grounding in notions of equality and the malevolence of fixed class. Oh, sure, this is not absolutely true: Able makes no effort to hide his peasant ancestry, and seems to think it doesn't matter, so he's certainly less class conscious, more egalitarian, than most of the people he meets. But he also expects an enormous level of deference from his "inferiors," and seems to regard his "superiors" [as] being due a great deal of it. And yes, he was frequently kind, even generous to those below him -- but in such a way that their status was perfectly clear.

For me, the incident that stuck with me was the one early on in *The Knight* where Able went to get a sea-berth on a ship. Quoted a price by the captain, he insisted on having the best cabin (turning the captain out) at less than half the price quoted... and to get it, he literally *threatened the man's life*. He acted, in short, like the brigands whose thievery he used to justify their slaughter not a few chapters before, taking what he wanted because he wanted it, and -- and in some sense this was, to me, even more damning -- because he clearly felt that it was his due as a knight.

Again, if there was any sign that all of this that Wolfe was presenting a critique of Able, that would be fine. If he was being presented as a boy who hadn't learned better, or a man trying but failing to be good... but while Wolfe's reputation as a subtle writer might make one reach for such an interpretation, I didn't see any real signs of it in the text. I got the impression that we were simply supposed to think Able was a good and admirable person, that Wolfe certainly thought so, that he was blind to all his (quite damning) flaws. Adam Stephanides, who hated *The Knight* (which, I hope I have made clear, I didn't), nevertheless has a passage in his self-described "rant" about it that strikes me as sadly on the mark:

Sir Able of the High Heart, the Uberknight who his inferiors willingly submit to (if not, they're treacherous curs, whom he rightfully punishes), not any of the other characters, not the world, and not the plot, such as it was. Able doesn't behave like an adolescent, magically given an adult body or not: what he does behave like is an adolescent boy's fantasy of how he would behave if given a powerful adult body. Nor does he sound in the least like an adolescent, contemporary or otherwise. When Able talks to other characters, he sounds like the generic Wolfe Competent Male; when he's narrating, he mostly sounds like Hoof, except when Wolfe throws in some incongruous "poetic" passages, or remembers that Able is supposed to be a modern teenager and tosses in a reference to Macs or baseball.

Overly-strongly put. But not, I think, fundamentally mistaken about the problems of the book.

And Wolfe's apparent (and, I believe, genuine) fundamental admiration for Able connects to the deeply problematic ethics of the work as a whole -- and, finally, to its politics.

It is necessary to address all of these criticisms, but Frug also touches on one of the central elements at work in the text: the decay of chivalry in the wake of modernity. He questions the value of these concepts as almost dangerous constructs:

What I found most profoundly disturbing was the sense that what Wolfe was ultimately trying to do was to redeem words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow -- words that, *for inescapably important moral reasons*, have indeed become (if indeed they were not always) obscene.

And this, at least, I don't think was my simplifying the work of a complex writer. (Rather, I think this was my (liberal) reaction to an essentially very conservative writer.) [...]

[A]long with honor and glory and fidelity come hierarchy, and servitude, and subservience, and caste: all right there in Wolfe's book, just like the world. Along comes all the horrors of pre-modern society that were destroyed by it, even as it introduced new horrors of its own.

I cannot address that words such as honor, glory, and courage actually embody disastrous ideas, but this is Frug's most cogent ideological point: Wolfe's works are simply not the subversive tomes that sophisticated contemporary readers expect. They are deeply entrenched in tradition, and, while Wolfe freely employs situational and dramatic irony, he takes those thematic concepts as seriously as they can be held. It might take some time to address all of Professor Frug's complaints, but Able's surreal predicament actually does explain the problematic themes he identifies. I find it necessary to consider that Wolfe is not writing mimetic realistic fiction but is dealing in symbolic and archetypal character types, completely divorced from the sociological criticism which currently prevails in academia and especially in the study of popular culture and contemporary literature.

The complex cosmology of Mythgarthr, where Able finds himself, is loosely based off of the nine worlds in Norse mythology, though there are only seven here. In the lowest world, near the climax of the story, the now fully matured Able, accompanied by an official known as the Earl Marshal, faces the most low god and learns:

“You come near the secret that lies at the heart of all things, Able. Worship me, and I will tell it. [...]

You behold me as I am, Able. It may be the sight is too much.” As it spoke, it no longer surrounded me. Instead there was before me upon a throne of ice a creature grossly great. Toad and dragon were in it. So was the Earl Marshal, and so was I. (Wolfe, *Wizard* 422).

As they flee the lowest worlds to return to a higher plane of existence, the text features a strange duplication:

“I wish I could sit here forever,” [the Earl Marshal] told me solemnly, “watching those waves and this sky, and eating this food.”

I paid little heed when he said it; but when we rose to return to Mythgarthr, I chanced to look behind us. There he sat with food before him, staring out over the sea, his face rapturous. I stopped to point, and he whispered, “I know.” There are things in Aelfrice I still do not understand. (Wolfe, *Wizard* 424)

Some readers would leave these strange outliers without scrutinizing them further, but often the best way to unearth what Wolfe is truly getting at is to try and assemble an explanation. From the very opening of the books, a suggestive subtext emerges.

Wolfe begins *The Wizard Knight* with a poem by Lord Dunsany that answers a very particular question. The answer might be applicable to the people and creatures encountered in the seven worlds of the novels:

Who treads those level lands of gold,
The level fields of mist and air,
And rolling mountains manifold
And towers of twilight over there?
No mortal foot upon them strays,
No archer in the towers dwells,
But feet too airy for our ways
Go up and down their hills and dells.
The people out of old romance,

And people that have never been (“The Riders”)

The weighty religious and philosophical themes of Wolfe's longer fictions seem almost secondary in this series, which at first appears to be a fun and fast-paced examination of power. Wolfe portrays a violent and class conscious (but still chivalrous) age; might is used (and misused) to maintain order. However, the narrator Able's insistence that he is really just a child in a man's body establishes a metaphor for the love of fantasy fiction in general that encapsulates the youthful yearning for a better time, free from office jobs and bills, containing magic, love, and strength of arms. Almost everyone Able encounters makes much the same admission, aching for childhood and feeling as if they, too, are still very young, no matter how battle hardened and experienced they appear to be. At one point, Able insists that everything he is and will be depends upon the singular object of his affections, the queen of the moss aelf: "I loved Queen Disiri, always, and nobody else; and if you do not understand that, you will never understand all the things I am going to tell you at all, because that was always the main thing. ... I knew I was just a kid inside" (Wolfe, *Knight* 93).

Two things separate Wolfe's fantasy from mere escapist fare. The first is characterization: in order for Able to mature in a world devoid of truly Christian concepts, there are certain self-imposed restrictions by which he attempts to live. Wolfe's sophistication as a writer becomes evident when his seemingly traditional narrative refuses to go in expected directions. The way that these characters employ their powers is just as important as having them. The other feature which sets Wolfe apart from almost every other fantasist involves a mountain of metaphorical subtext that congeals at times but might easily be ignored, and in *The Wizard Knight* the dream sequences suggest a tragic allegory which answers the primary questions of the text – what kind of boy does not get to live his life as a boy, is promised a sword he cannot use, and is given

magic he must never wield? Why does Able seem to have so much potential that he is never able to enjoy? Why is so much time spent on the subtle distinction between *can* and *may* in his education? When the dreams and other seemingly random patterns in the text come into a rigid structural focus, it can be discerned that Able truly *is* still a child in an adult body, “a kid inside,” although the body he inhabits is ultimately his mother’s. At one point, Able waxes philosophical when the Earl Marshal asks him how to reach Aelfrice, and he responds, “How far to summer, sir? How many steps? How far to the dream my mother had?” (Wolfe, *Wizard* 314).

The irony of this question is almost too much to bear. All that Able could ever be is encapsulated in it, for he is but a potential, a dream that only once lived in his mother’s womb, one of the “people that had never been” from old romances, as noted in Lord Dunsany’s “The Riders” above. When Able meets the brothers Uns and Duns (one of them crippled, weak, and jealous of his taller and less afflicted sibling), he is drawn into an encounter with the ogre Org, a chameleon-like monster whom the handicapped Uns saved from starvation and death so that he might have some secret power over his brother. After fighting with Org and attempting to sneak the monster into Sheerwall Castle, Able experiences three “unrelated” visions that highlight his condition. Readers are tempted to ascribe the dreams to the presence of the mystical bowstring which supposedly grants Able knowledge of those who live in America. Of course, what Wolfe has actually done in *The Wizard Knight* is to switch the narrative modalities: the dreams are reality, while his “waking” experiences constitute a Jungian dreamscape reveling in the myths alive in the collective unconscious. Able dreams:

I was a woman in a dirty bed in a stuffy little room. An old woman sitting beside my bed kept telling me to push, and I pushed, although I was so tired I could not push hard, no

matter how hard I tried. I knew my baby was trying to breathe, and could not breathe, and would soon die.

“Push!”

I had tried to save; now I was only trying to get away. He would not let go, climbing on me, pushing me underwater.

The moon shone through pouring rain as I made my way down the muddy track. At its end the ogre loomed black and huge. I was the boy who had gone into Disiri’s cave, not the man who had come out. My sword was Disira’s grave marker, the short stick tied to the long one with a thong. I pushed the point into the mud to mark my own grave, and went on. When the ogre threw me, it became such a sword as I wished for, with a golden pommel and a gleaming blade.

I floated off the ground and started back for it, but I could no longer breathe. (Wolfe, *Knight* 257-8)

As with so much in Wolfe, the brothers Uns and Duns and their pet ogre are symbolic of something that Able is actually experiencing, and these chimeric visions represent a more certain actuality than the surface impressions our narrator perceives as his reality. Indeed, what Wolfe has done, with great subtlety, is switch the dreams and the reality. In the second of these dreams, we should note that Able faces the same threat as the unborn child in the passage above, and that he cannot escape from something which has a fierce hold on him. Pregnancy imagery in *The Wizard Knight* usually accompanies the omnipresent threat of starvation and strangulation. The books also feature a continually renewed conflict and uneasiness between forces that would be

on the same side if they saw each other clearly. Able fights with the knights who serve King Arnthor as often as he fights the giant Angrborn, if not more. However, sometimes Able's foes wind up being surprisingly generous and capable of kindness as well as violence, as Garsecg (the name Arnthor's brother, the dragon Setr, uses in his human form) demonstrates. The giant King Gilling displays real affection for his human queen. Although Mythgarthr is known as "The Clearing Where Tales Are Told," it is formed from the dead body of the giant Ymir, as Midgard is in Norse myth (Wolfe, *Wizard* 47). One vital aspect of this involves a possible meaning of the name Ymir: "twin." According to Andres Kalif, Ymir is derived from the same root as the Latin word *gemini* (69). The strange doubling of the Earl Marshal in the opening quote above begins to make metaphorical sense when considering the possibility that, if Able is indeed still a child of the womb, as the dreams above suggest, he is not alone.

Even on the surface, the novels explore the development and actualization of a mature self. Perhaps the most important figure in understanding the shifting characters and repeated motifs in *The Wizard Knight* is Carl Jung, whose idea of recurring and primordial archetypes based in the collective unconscious might help illuminate many of the most inexplicable moments in the text. While it would be easy to map family, story, and animal archetypes onto the fantasy elements of Able's adventures, on a deeper level Jung's examination of the forging of the self against the threat of fragmentation and flawed self-perception also resonates strongly with Wolfe's series. In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung says:

Man, as we realize if we reflect for a moment, never perceives anything fully or comprehends anything completely. ... There are, moreover, unconscious aspects of our perception of reality. The first is the fact that even when our senses react to real

phenomena, sights, and sounds, they are somehow translated from the realm of reality into that of the mind.”

These psychic events are still subject to a kind of symbolic framework that of course reveals something about the self, but sometimes those revelations are very far from obvious. In discussing the unconscious psyche, Jung asserts that it might very well manifest itself in dream, which operates not on rational thought but on symbolic images. This chapter will soon return to the idea of Able’s story as a kind of dream below in an attempt to explain his memories of America (as well as the first-person pregnancy imagery glimpsed in the dream above). The unconscious mind Jung describes manifests itself as a kind of double, two personalities or subjects within the same individual. Jung even goes on to say, “[I]t is one of the curses of modern man that many people suffer from this divided personality It is not merely the neurotic whose right hand does not know what the left hand is doing.” In his assessment of consciousness, Jung claims that humanity may not yet have achieved a reasonable degree of continuity: “It is still vulnerable and liable to fragmentation.”

The most important aspect of Jungian archetypes for this discussion involves the idea that myths, art, religion, and dreams are all, in Jung’s assessment, based on potentials which are like psychological instincts. Archetypal images like the mother, the child, the flood, and the trickster are transformed when they intersect and combine with the waking world of culture and personal experience. These archetypes are primordial in nature and do not require indoctrination or even education, existing at first on an unconscious level and binding all of humanity in a collective unconscious. It might be worthwhile to note that some very common animal archetypes include the enduring horse which never surrenders, the faithful dog characterized by unquestioning loyalty, and the devious cat motivated by selfishness. (This alone might serve as the best

explanation for the cat Mani's sudden departure from the text, while Able has a small dog even in the final scenes.) However, these archetypes are all aspects of the self and expressions of the previously mentioned collective unconscious. They are elemental forces, which play a role in the creation of the human mind, and were often identified, according to Jung, as elemental spirits in antiquity. Among the archetypal events Jung describes are birth, death, marriage, separation from parents, and, perhaps essentially for our discussion, the union of opposites. Some archetypal motifs include creation, the apocalypse, and the flood.

The threats of drowning and an inability to breathe saturate the text (whether through Org's strangulation, the garroting of Setr with Parka's cord, the nose injury of Svon, the air-sucking wound of King Gilling, or even Uns's own easily forgotten injury, amongst many others: "Uns had been stabbed; the wound sucked air until we bandaged it, and he seemed weak" (Wolfe, *Wizard* 392).) The possibility of drowning occurs most notably when Able meets what could very well be his doom riding on the white griffin in an attempt to vanquish the dragon Grengarm. As the younger Toug later says, "He fell into the sea" (27). The cat Mani stresses that this did in fact kill Able, somehow. (Perhaps more accurately, Mani insists that Able is dead in the second volume, despite his palpable presence throughout.)

Water and the sea also become explicit in their connection to the womb when Able learns how to harness the powers of the sea to heal himself from Garseg: "You will never drown. ... You are one with the sea – more than you know" (Wolfe, *Knight* 169). Soon after, as Able first meets the massive creative force of Aelfrice known as Kulili, he reflects:

I was thinking about Disiri and the statue [of Kulili], and they got mixed up in my mind, and I started wondering if I was really real at all. It seemed to me this might be what it was like when you were just a memory, and maybe Disiri was remembering me, and

would always remember me, would always love me like I would always love her, and this was me in her mind. (Wolfe, *Knight* 170)

As with many of the most poignant ruminations in Wolfe, Able's thoughts bear a closer resemblance to his situation than he realizes; Kulili, composed as she is of threads and worms which can scatter and unravel, whose constituent parts somehow forge the various Aelf species, represents a profoundly scientific biological creative force. The fiery Aelf, who can sustain Able by sharing their blood, without a soul of their own, bear an uncanny resemblance in function to red blood cells, which lack nuclei and do not contain their own DNA, so that they may carry more hemoglobin and distribute oxygen throughout the body. Some of Able's dreams also seem to be readily explicable only as describing a metaphorical conception, with the swallowing of sperm by an egg:

In the dream I had that morning, I was myself for a change, but very young, much younger than I had been when I came out of Parka's cave. I was sitting in a little boat and paddling up the Griffin. Bold Berthold stood watching from the bank, and Setr swam beside me, spouting water and steam like a whale. Up the river, Mother was waiting for me. Pretty soon Bold Berthold was left behind. I saw Mother's face among the leaves of a willow and in a hawthorn, beautiful and smiling, and crowned with hawthorn blossoms; but the Griffin wound on, and when the hawthorn was past I saw her no more. From time to time I glimpsed a griffin of stone from whose mouth the river issued. I tried to reach it, but came instead to an opening in a tube of thick green glass.

And emerged at once, mounted on a gray warhorse and gripping a short lance from which a pennant fluttered. The stone griffin stood before me, tall as a mountain and much more

stern. I couched the lance and charged, and was swallowed up at once. (Wolfe, *Knight* 319)

The hawthorn tree is known as a fairy tree, as those who sit under it might enter the fey underworld; it is also a symbol of fertility. One legend associated with the hawthorn suggests that taking it inside a house will prove fatal to the perpetrator's mother. The willow tree implies renewal and fertility because it can be regrown easily from a small branch, no matter how its fragment is planted (Kendall). We should also note that in this vision, Setr, the brother of Arnthor, is actually in the water with Able. On the plains of Jotunland, Able experiences an even more explicit version of this dream after fighting the Angrborn:

Water surged about me, carrying me with it. A school of fish like scarlet jewels passed and met a second school of iridescent silver. They intermeshed, passed. The iridescent fish surrounded me, and were gone.

The girl-face of Kulili lay below me as an island must lie below a bird. Her vast lips moved, but the only sound was in my mind. *I made them. I shaped them as a woman molds dough, taking something from the trees, something from the beasts that felled the trees, and something from myself.*

I saw her hands then, hands knit of a million millions of thread-worms, and Disiri taking shape as they labored.

That dream was lost among [many others], dreams of death, long before my eyelids fluttered.

But not lost completely. (Wolfe, *Knight* 390)

Readers should keep these images in mind throughout the entire series, as well as the passage of Able through a tube of green glass; the dreams and the waking world have been switched in a

subtle, symbolic, and anachronic fashion: Able's dreams of death are real, but his memory will not be lost, for there must be a dreamer in whose mind his memory still exists. While he speculates above that he might exist only in the mind of Disiri, it might be more accurate to assume that the dream Able inhabits belongs to his mother. Right before these dreams, Able realizes that his understanding of the events he has experienced is somehow flawed: "But in Aelfrice, Setr changed into a man called Garsecg, and Uri and Baki had been turned into Khimairas. Or maybe turned themselves into Khimairas. I don't know which. ... Flying monsters. Only there's something wrong about all this. I can't put my finger on it, but I know there is" (390). Part of what is wrong involves the defensive, subjective filtering of Able's perceptions and sensations into a coherent narrative, a myth which describes the biological events and the pain, hunger, and difficulty breathing he experiences. This idea is also introduced when he learns that the Aelf might seem loathsome to some. Able defiantly proclaims, "My eyes are mine ... and they do what I tell them" (Wolfe, *Knight* 58). This is further emphasized in the second volume when Able assures Toug of something which is difficult to reconcile with the surface story concerning the Aelf. When Baki renounces Setr and says that her mother is Kulili, Able rests a hand on Toug's shoulder and says, "She's a thing in your mind, and you can trust me on this. She's a thought, a dream" (Wolfe, *Wizard* 44). Of course, Toug might be another such manifestation of the self or the dimly perceived brother, though the Aelf are distinct in representing truly external (and biologically "lower") forces within the environment of the womb. This statement serves to highlight how very literally Wolfe must be taken to ascertain "truth" in his narratives; it is easy to take the language as metaphorical, when it is in fact exceedingly precise: Able directly admits that the characters peopling his tale are dreams. Able's fights with the young Svon and Toug at the very start of *The Knight* are also symbolic of the

struggle he faces within and without, and soon enough in the narrative, Toug and Svon fight each other (while the giants Thiazi and Schildstarr form an alliance.) The relationship between Toug and Able is reinforced by a vision representing the past during Beel's divination: Toug and Able appear in Aelfrice together. Their names even mean much the same thing: Toug is an "Old High German word for 'it is useful; be useful.'" In this sense it is similar to the names Able and Nytir" (Andre-Driussi, *Wizard Knight Companion* 94). A rather innocuous statement from Bold Berthold concerning Toug reinforces this detail: "He's not too bad a lad, Toug ain't. Recollects me of my brother" (Wolfe, *Wizard* 29).

When we consider that Able and Bold could somehow be twins locked in a silent struggle in the womb, another dream Able has after the Osterlings invade the *Western Trader* and injure him gains an extra layer of meaning. He is led to the ship by his servant Pouk, who says, "I was lookin' out sharp for a berth when you spied me on th' wharf" (Wolfe, *Knight* 117). Able might be looking out sharp for a b[i]rth as well. While the name Berthold can mean "splendid" or "bright rule," it might also be considered as a homophone accurately describing the struggle between Able and his brother. After Able's injury, the dream invokes the fear of strangulation:

In the dream I had been way down under the main deck. It had been pitch dark, but I had known somehow that our mother was not really dead at all – she was down there, tied up and gagged so she could not make any noise, and if I could find her I could cut her loose and bring her up on deck. Only the captain was down there too, and he had a rope he wanted to choke me with. He was moving around very quietly, trying to come up behind me and get it around my neck. I was trying to be quiet, too, so he could not find me. ... There had been somebody else down there with us in my dream, somebody that never moved at all or made any noise; but I did not know who it was. (Wolfe, *Knight* 114)

Here Able, some quiet stranger he can sense without knowing, and his mother are all somehow below deck in the dark; he is aware of the threat of the captain lurking to strangle him with a rope. Soon after this, Able and the captain argue about his possessions, a scene which troubled Professor Frug greatly because of its moral implications. The captain is concerned with his own ship and cargo, and winds up attacking Able. Able's response is accidentally fatal: "I hit him with Sword Breaker thinking I would knock him out. I hit him too hard, though, and the diamond-shaped blade went deep into his head instead" (Wolfe, *Knight* 129). Their argument over resources, sleeping space, and personal ownership ends with a splash after Able drops the captain's body into the ocean. Yet who could that silent and unseen stranger in the dark from Able's dream represent, along with Able and his mother? Could it be a dimly perceived brother in utero, whose very presence has begun to encroach on Able's space within the womb, stealing his resources and starving him of even the oxygen he requires? These recurring dreams eventually intersect with the idea of nonlinear time, as revealed when King Arnthor imprisons Able for delivering his message:

I slept in my cell that night, and wished (if the truth be told) that I had some means of locking it from inside. I was back on the *Western Trader*. (This was not the first time that dream had recurred since my return from Skai.) I saw the vicious, famished faces of the Osterlings and knew they meant to land on Glas and that my mother was there. I went to the captain and ordered him to put about; he did not hear or see me, and when I knocked the hourglass from his table, it returned of its own accord. (Wolfe, *Wizard* 402)

It is in these times of desperation, after Arnthor has rejected his message, that Able considers joining the invaders: "I might also have asked Org to bring me whatever meat he could find and united myself with the Osterlings, who eat the flesh of their foes, and howled in my madness"

(Wolfe, *Wizard* 416). When the Earl Marshal of Thortower becomes disgusted at just such a display of Osterling cannibalism, Able asks, “Is it worse to kill a child, or to eat it before the worms do?” (426). Readers should also keep this question in mind when considering the absolute lack of resources Mythgarthr suffers during its final siege, as if permanent famine and cold weather have come to the world.

Only at the very end of the series will Able look through his helm and see a portion of the reality around him in his waking consciousness – otherwise, his situation is only glimpsed through the visions and dreams which saturate the tale. Able finds the very idea of the Khimairae to be unsettling for some indeterminable reason he can’t quite pin down. The word used to describe them itself serves as an extra-textual component in Wolfe’s puzzle. At one point, Able even asks, “What has a Khimaira to do with me?” (146). Readers should anticipate that the answer might be “everything,” though not in an obvious way.

First, there is the idea that the two almost indistinguishable Fire Aelf might have somehow “turned themselves” into Khimairae, though they are obviously beholden to Setr. Clearly, their names are associated with chimera, a thing hoped or wished for but ultimately impossible to achieve. In science, a human chimera is a person with genetic information from two sources, normally occurring when one twin absorbs the other during gestation. It might be useful to think about every interaction in *The Wizard Knight* as a manifestation of just such a process, encompassing the monstrous, metaphorical, and biological meanings of the word chimera; Wolfe employs all of them. This is especially evident in the pivotal scenes in which Bold Berthold loses his shadow in the lake and in the climax, in which Able heals his brother, restoring what Bold once lost.

When Able learns how to wield a sword from the knight Garvaon, the lessons he learns would be strangely applicable to the needs of a sperm: he is told that his sword must flow like the sea, and that “Speed isn’t the main thing. It isn’t the most important thing. It’s *everything*” (Wolfe, *Knight* 343). Later, Garvaon will teach Able about foining in fights that are a matter of life and death, pushing the blade through an opponent. He even gives an example of foining entirely through a giant’s neck (354). While the verb certainly implies thrusting, Shakespeare often used it with a sexual connotation, as this description of Falstaff shows:

Alas the day, take heed of him – he stabbed me
in mine own house, most beastly, in good faith. ‘A cares
not what mischief he does, if his weapon be out. He
will foin like any devil; he will spare neither man,
woman, nor child. (2 *Henry IV*, II.i.13-17)

Able and Garvaon also have an archery competition, and Able’s shot, which he intends to miss on purpose, has a rather dramatic effect:

I was starting to feel like I was cheating, and I did not like that. Instead of shooting at the target, I aimed for the top leaves of the scrubby little tree they had hung it on. I shot, and watched my arrow fly true to aim. It passed through the leaves and hit the cliff-face behind them. A few pebbles fell, then a few more.

All at once the cliff face gave way, collapsing with a grinding roar. (Wolfe, *Knight* 327)

Beyond the powerful implications of Able’s accuracy with a bow and the long ranging effects of one such arrow (a sperm) reaching its ultimate destination and piercing a living “cliff-face,” the novel creates other metaphors that are suggestive of our narrator’s condition without being immediately obvious. One of them involves the strange meal that Able experiences after killing

the Queen's undead champion, Loth (whose name bears an uncanny resemblance to the figure who encourages Able's disobedience to the precepts of Skai, Lothur, a Loki cognate).

A chef put a great roast swan on our table, and at a signal from Arnthor split it with a knife not much smaller than a sword. Split, it could be seen that a goose had been stuffed into the swan to be roasted with it, a plover into the goose, a duck into the plover, and three lesser birds into the duck, all these save the swan having been boned. (Wolfe, *Wizard* 395)

During this dinner scene, in which Able must reveal how he came across his dog Gylf, Morcaine figuratively collapses into Arnthor: "[Morcaine's] face became that of her brother, I cannot say how. I was not conscious of having turned, yet it was to him I spoke (396).

It is in this scene that Able delivers his message from the Aelf. As readers should have come to expect, rather than granting him freedom, completing his great task merely serves to entrap him once again: "After that I was locked in a cell with walls of living rock, reeking, narrow, and very dark; and left alone there" (398). It is at these moments in the text, when Able is trapped and hungry, that the truth behind the Gnostic fantasy of Able's adventures emerges. If these metaphors are taken seriously, it is quite easy to determine why the walls around him are living, and why he is constantly stationed at a narrow pass or trapped in a cell at every turn. Metaphorically, it is explained by the swan that is split in twain at Arnthor's signal, containing a goose with a plover inside it, leading to a duck with three lesser birds in that – not only does this echo the manner in which the cosmology of *The Wizard Knight* is constructed, with its seven levels, it also reveals something about the various people, monsters, and magical beings populating the novel, all ultimately contained within one biological system, just as the large and unsettling creatures visible in the blood and the semen of the giants also suggests. In many ways,

the swan torn asunder reflects what has happened to Able and Bold, calling back to the grouse Able initially offered to share with the older man when he was welcomed into Bold's hut. Bold always insists that the young boy is truly his brother, though they are initially at different stages of their life cycles.

Of course, Able is not the only character whose story seems to rely upon biological metaphors. When he is tasked with guarding the mountain pass by Duke Marder and finally takes up his position, Able encounters three knights. One of them, Sir Woddet, describes a battle scenario that can really only be understood as another metaphor for impregnation. When Duke Marder enters the Sun Room, he selects companions by using seeds.¹¹ Woddet says, "We herded the Golden Caan and his elephants into the angle between two canals and charged him. He had the elephants out front, and they killed a score of us and took that many lances before they fell. I lost my sword and used my mace" (Wolfe, *Wizard* 127). In this manner, Woddet conquers the Golden Caan and becomes the Sun Knight (with an obvious play on the word son). Able's response after this story as he scans the nearby cliff tops is not quite the *non sequitur* it first appears to be: "It isn't easy for a boy to become a man" (127). A faithful map of those two canals might look suspiciously like fallopian tubes. Woddet affirms that the process of becoming a man is irrevocable, and that one can never go back. However, the entirety of *The Wizard Knight* emphasizes Able's reaction to the story: in some difficult situations, becoming a real man remains but an impossible dream.

Many fans insist that there is no right way to read Gene Wolfe, and further claim that settling on one "true" reading actually limits the work. One of the literary models for *The Wizard*

¹¹ Woddet's original symbol, that of a menhir, a tall upright stone with a spear through it, is also slightly suggestive of a stylized sperm cell.

Knight might very well be *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, in which the addle-pated Alonso creates a love interest in the form of Dulcinea and then proceeds to prove that he is a true knight, acting in imitation of the romances which so influenced him, assuming the persona of Don Quixote. Able, too, seeks out Disiri and knighthood and discovers that it is not only might and battle that make chivalry something worth exalting. Cervantes, of course, has a more complicated relationship to chivalry, but an introduction to *Don Quixote* by Paul Montazzoli explores what makes the novel of the delusional knight so enduring:

As the pleasant, instructive satire it had turned into during the eighteenth century, *Don Quixote* might have lost its international audience as soon as that century passed. The Romantics' belief that the book was a grave parable and hardly a burlesque at all insured its fame in their own time, and also – by allowing us to see it as a burlesque that transcends the genre – made possible its fame in ours. Today, readers continue to turn to this dauntingly huge novel because they know it offers serious themes to grapple with, not just hilarities to revel in.

To try to describe these themes is, first of all, to try to crystallize the meaning of Cervantes's delicious and exasperating protagonist. At the same time, we might keep in mind those twentieth-century critics for whom *Don Quixote* is an example of an open text, inviting an infinite number of equally valid interpretations and excluding only a definitive one. According to this approach, a nihilistic view of the book that construes it as satirizing the human imposition of value on a meaningless universe would be as respectable as a Romantic view.

As an archetype, this monkishly wasted, overtopping figure with a lance and helmet can be said to stand for virtue rendered useless or destructive by deluded egotism. To give

Don Quixote this significance makes him sound like the hero of a tragedy, or of a comedy of a disturbing kind – which is exactly what Cervantes’s masterpiece is. And doubly disturbing since it insists that the virtue in human beings cannot survive without the distortions of self-exaltation. (Montazzoli x-xi)

Wolfe’s novel also interrogates the value of romance and chivalry in a world in which pain, suffering, and scarcity are very real, though Able’s struggle seems to culminate quite differently: relinquishing his ego does not invalidate his maturation, nor does it deflate the power of romantic ideals. In many ways, Able’s final sacrifice upholds and buttresses the mature principles and responsibilities chivalry demands. Even with all of the power of Skai and of Eterne, Able’s ultimate challenge is to use his powers to heal, sacrificing his potential rather than selfishly seeking only his own glory. Is there truly no definitive reading of Wolfe’s novels, as Montazzoli suggests of *Don Quixote*? If readers accept that Wolfe is capable of constructing scaffolding and puzzles which point to an explanation that makes sense of many mysterious, seemingly insignificant details which are clearly present in his work, then pattern, repetition, and objective information outside the text can all support a reading that helps contextualize the narrative (and Able’s sacrifice) more clearly. Wolfe has several modes, and *The Wizard Knight* appears to be similar in nature to *Peace* and *There Are Doors*, in which the surface understanding of the main character requires some extra context to truly ground the narrative.

In *Peace*, protagonist Alden Dennis Weer’s status at the time of his narration is not controversial, and this might be in large part thanks to Wolfe’s candidness in interviews concerning the novel and the significance of the first line: *Peace* represents the ruminations of a dead man. Since Wolfe’s early openness, readers have been largely left to their own devices, and Wolfe has become increasingly reticent to reveal the overarching structural mysteries of his

major works. In *The Wizard Knight*, the harsh and bewildering physical circumstances in which Able finds himself encourages the creation of a consistent story, the birth of a powerful myth intimately tied to his biological experiences: he undergoes many tests and trials, and the story engages the power of imagination to describe Able's own personal development. Furthermore, Wolfe plays all the tricks of late Modernism that authors such as James Joyce employed, even going so far as to create letter associations for characters and cloaking mimetic scenes in myth and allusion – but he does it in a readable adventure story that by and large escapes the attention of all but the most pedantic and obsessed readers, in a way that never compromises the tale itself.

If readers are to achieve a holistic understanding of the thematic weight of Able's sacrifice at the end of the book, it is necessary to be aware of the subtext. *The Wizard Knight* directly challenges readers to understand the intersection of Mythgarthr and America in its conclusion. When Able puts on his helm of true seeing, he is shocked when he discovers something far beyond his understanding:

Lovely Disiri became a puppet of mud and leaves. That was horrible, but I had expected it. Two other things I had not expected and cannot explain. The Valfather was a bright shadow. Nothing more.

And Bold Berthold, who had been sitting beside Gerda, vanished. She was the same lovely young woman, but Berthold was gone and you, Ben, sat in his place. As I say, I cannot explain these things. (Wolfe, *Wizard* 476)

Just because Able can't explain these things does not mean that the details are forever doomed to murky incomprehension. The conclusion of *The Wizard Knight* clearly involves several important acts of healing: Able mends Bold and others in this climactic scene, breaking his oath to the gods of Skai and using the magic he has been granted, but at a terrible cost: "It took a lot

to restore the thing [Bold] had left in a pond so long ago” (474). Able also heals several other characters, including Uns, Lynett, Gylf, and Wistan (who once fought with Toug over Able’s mace and dropped it into a well in a symbolically resonant act.) When Able straightens the crippled and bent Uns, the text notes, “How slowly he rose! He thought it was a dream ... and feared at every finger’s width gained that he might wake. Toug came to stand by him. Toug was crying, and so was I.” The tears here are far more poignant than a first reading might suggest; the Valfather reveals that Able’s destiny is already sealed: “You would end your life if I asked, and will end it in any case” (475). Able’s act of healing, even though his narrative continues, cuts off many of the opportunities he might otherwise have had – the possibilities of *can* have been exhausted in his final choice, in favor of healing those he loves and returning to Aelfrice with Disiri.

Yet how can readers understand the nature of Able’s sacrifice and rationalize how Bold Berthold could actually be Ben when Able looks at him, if Arthur Ornsby truly crossed from Earth into Mythgarthr after fleeing his family’s cabin? As with much in Wolfe which is at first opaque, several seemingly unrelated mysteries can work to help clarify others, though there is still lupine trickery in the narrator’s initial memories of America. It becomes difficult to explain how Bold might literally be Ben without acknowledging that the surface narrative is a palimpsest for the struggle between two brothers who vie for increasingly scant resources and risk killing the mother before one chimeric twin is reabsorbed and assimilated by the surviving brother. In one sense, Able is named after the slain biblical Abel, though his brother Bold/Ben is not truly an intentional Cain. Able’s story is ultimately a symbolic dream message sent by the archangel Michael to his mother and perhaps his living brother, which recounts the intense and mystical struggle of becoming real against harsh, if not impossible, odds in symbolic form.

In addition to these symbolic and archetypal features of the narrative, Wolfe also allows letter conglomerations to inform repetitive patterns in the text. For example, the struggle between Svon and Toug at the start of the second book is counterpoised against the alliance of the giants Schildstarr and Thiazi later in the volume. These letter combinations are omnipresent, as when the text discusses Marder's Sheerwall and the wounding of its Master Thope, who receives a stab wound which foreshadows both King Gilling's initial injury and Uns's own sucking wound. So, too, do the letters A, B, C, G, and O seem supersaturated with consistent meaning, among other less prevalent patterns. The ravenous hunger of Org is of course synonymous with the cannibalistic tendencies of the Osterlings, and it is also vitally important that when Able delivers the starving child Ossar (born of the woman Disira and the criminal Seaxneat) to the Aelf (receiving Gylf in exchange), Bold is nowhere to be seen. In an act which only makes sense symbolically, Seaxneat has split open Disira's head, but left the child Ossar intact; this reveals the violence of fertilization, which destroys the integrity of the egg and alters its nature while leaving something else in its place. It is no coincidence that one of the final visions involves Able's glorious knowledge of Bold's triumph over Schildstarr at the very end of the book, though in many ways Svon, Schildstarr, Sheerwall, Seaxneat, Setr, Sword Breaker, and even the swan split in half at Arnthor's dinner are different aspects of the same basic thing in Able's (or, more accurately, his mother's) consciousness. They are further linked to the G elements in the text through the relationship between Garsecg and Setr. Perhaps the largest task of the mythographer and of Wolfe's reader involves discerning how reality and myth actually conjoin, and in *The Wizard Knight*, as in much of Wolfe, this intersection is fully defined through the structural choices and parallel situations Wolfe constructs.

Above, Stephen Frug voiced the most common concern leveled at Able as a character: his excessive use of force, sometimes for seemingly petty reasons, especially in *The Knight*. Is Able truly a bully? In a metaphorical exploration of the text, Able has some very good reasons for his attitudes, thrust into an exceedingly harsh environment where only the fittest, the quickest, and the sturdiest can survive. However, Wolfe's consistent, surface narrative, imposed on top of the circular and repetitive gestation themes throughout the book, still suggests moral movement and growth, not stagnation. The pattern of two potential allies struggling with each other based on either greed, envy, or a misunderstanding creates a simple focus, despite all of the confusing action and fantastic elements at work in the series. Many of these events are informed by Jungian archetypes, which are often mutable and complex; the four major ones - the self, the persona, the anima, and the shadow - are all probably present in the text. The anima, the feminine image projected from the male psyche, might best be expressed as Idnn and Disiri, while Org and Gylf share in aspects of the shadow. In order for actualization and individuation to occur, Jung believed that the various traits embodied in these archetypes had to be integrated rather than repressed. Able's very existence becomes something like a persona, an expression he projects outwards from the vulnerable child: the chimeric and idealized dreams of what he would like to be.

Much of the action that readers experience through Able's narration is actually dreamlike. In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung notes:

Very often dreams have a definite, evidently purposeful structure, indicating an underlying idea or intention – though, as a rule, the latter is not immediately comprehensible. I therefore began to consider whether one should pay more attention to the actual form and content of a dream, rather than allowing “free” association to lead

one off through a train of ideas to complexes that could as easily be reached by other means.

The structure of Wolfe's series also indicates an underlying idea as well. Jung continues:

A story told by the conscious mind has a beginning, a development, and an end, but the same is not true of a dream. Its dimensions in time and space are quite different; to understand it you must examine it from every aspect – just as you may take an unknown object in your hands and turn it over and over until you are familiar with every detail of its shape.

These patterns in *The Wizard Knight*, once they are apprehended, are too concrete to be accidental. The dream is not linear in the way that some narratives are, because it constitutes a gradually transformative cycle, approaching the union of opposites and a sacrificial individuation. The symbolic representation of events is nothing new to Gene Wolfe, but the presence of so many shifting archetypes and the repetition of such a profoundly specific conflict suggests that the series is truly dealing with the logic of the unconscious. The final understanding of the text endorsed by this chapter involves the method which the archangel Michael will choose to deliver Able's letter to his brother, and, more specifically, to his mother, so that she may know her son at last: beyond the text, the archangel sends her a dream of the child who died in her womb. At times, Able's memories and his identity are mixed up with those of her unconscious mind. This is why the Jungian dream logic of the text works so perfectly, and why the jargon and slang of the series, which troubled Stephen Frug so much, spans many disparate time periods.

One of the lynchpins of my approach to Wolfe in general involves applying smaller sections of the narrative that either provide closure or elucidate a more obvious theme to the

larger work. Perhaps this structural tendency in Wolfe's writing is most obvious to readers in *Peace*, but the reading of *The Book of the Short Sun* I will present in the next chapter in brief also relies upon many of these micro-stories to provide the closure that at first seems missing, even in resolving plot questions. In *The Wizard Knight*, many of the scenes become highly metaphorical, but perhaps the most important one occurs right at the heart of the second volume, when Gilling lies injured in his bed. Sir Able comes to Utgard and takes Toug's sister Ulfa back to Glennidam, far to the South. He sees two pigs hanging in the kitchen, which have been butchered by her father. His dog Gylf hungers for their meat. Even as Ulfa looks for other meaty bones her father had been saving for the soup to feed the dog instead, decrying the universal dangers of raw pork, Able hears the wind moaning, "in the chimney, stirring the ashes" (Wolfe, *Wizard* 213).

I was already outside, and for a moment there can have been no sound in the kitchen save the creaking of the hinges of its door, which swung back and forth, and then (caught by a gust of wind) slammed shut.

One sunny afternoon I had jogged through this field on the same errand, a field full of barley. The barley was reaped now. I ran on stubble, my left hand clutching Eterne to keep her from slapping my thigh. "*Disiri? Disiri?*"

There was no answer; and yet I felt an answer had come: the leaves had spoken for her, saying here I am.

"*Disiri!*"

You can't find me.

I stopped, listening, but the leaves spoke no more. "I can't," I admitted. "I'll search the seven worlds for you, and turn out Mythgarthr and Aelfrice like empty sacks. But I won't find you unless you want to be found. I know that."

Give up?

“Yes, I give up.” I raised both hands.

“Here I am.” She stepped from behind the dark bole of the largest tree; and although I could scarcely see anything, I saw her and knew she was tall as few women are tall and slender as no human woman ever is, and too lovely for me to understand, ever, exactly how lovely she was.

My arms closed around her, and we kissed. Her lips were sweeter than honey and warm with life, and there was nothing wrong that mattered because there was nothing wrong we could not mend; and there was love as long as we lived, and love did matter, love would always matter....

“You have the sword Eterne.” Her voice smiled.

I gasped for breath. “Do you want her? She’s yours.”

“I have her already,” she said, “because you have her. Know you why she is called Eterne?”

“Because she’s almost as beautiful as you are, and beauty is eternal.” (Wolfe, *Wizard* 213-4)

Disiri says that there are signs of age on Able, and he hints that he could be younger if he used the power of the Overcyns he now has, but that he would then have to go back to Skai, having broken his oath. Disiri replies:

“Yet you ride among clouds.”

“Cloud bears me up. I do not bear her.”

Our lips met; when we parted we were lying upon moss. “The game is nearly over,” she whispered. “That is what I came to tell you. Did you think it would go on forever?” (215)

Gylf finds Able alone after this and tells his master that he has eaten. Able then arrives at Idnn's camp in Jotunland almost instantly, borne by Cloud. In the matter of a few pages, Able traverses the entirety of Mythgarthr, from the deepest south to the camp where Idnn waits, but this scene is essential for its thematic implications: Able seeks for Disiri everywhere, but he cannot find her. The instant he surrenders, she appears again; however, this should not be seen as a sign of her perverse cruelty, which will only accept Able on her terms. It is Able's sacrifice which makes Disiri's appearance possible, a surrender to inevitability. The novel returns to this theme over and over, but here Disiri makes clear that the shapes Able sees in the clouds in the very first scene of the novel never stopped influencing him: it is a game he plays, though his situation is the furthest thing from carefree play. This scene resonates strongly with the fate of King Gilling, who lies wounded and near death to leave his bed out of love one last time when he hears Idnn's voice, and in doing so, die, further contextualizing the emotional impact of the sacrifice Able will make.

When Able first chases those clouds in the sky to Aelfrice, he descends a slope in darkness and is soon grabbed by mysterious figures later revealed to be the Aelf. When he comes to himself again, he finds himself in a cave with Parka, who instructs him to plant a seed but advises him that he will have to wait for the slack of the tide. She also gives him the name Able of the High Heart. He realizes that he has lost something while he tarried with the Aelf. Indeed, he notes, "it was all mixed up with somebody else, a little girl who had played with me; and there had been big, big trees, and ferns a lot bigger than we were, and clear springs" (Wolfe, *Knight* 22).

This sudden shift in environment at the start resembles a sperm chasing an idealized vision of an egg, being hostilely transplanted from one environment to another, winding up in a

strange cave, and even given the mandate of planting a seed. Since the events in *The Wizard Knight* are the myths romanticizing the fertilized Able's terrible struggle to survive in the womb's hostile but loving environment, an a-temporal quality to his story emerges. On one level, Able's union with Disiri here results in Able being "all mixed up" with her (a meeting which, when it recurs in the text, will result in him suddenly "growing," as she is trapped beneath a lightning-blasted tree) - this represents fertilization, the doubling of genetic content and a vastly and rapidly increased size. Later dreams he has of swimming with Garsecg among silver and red fish harken back to his recollection of life as a sperm, and several of the scenes involving the Moonrider and the figure of the moon also resonate with his mad chase after the castle. As emphasized at the start of this treatment of *The Wizard Knight*, Able will eventually dream that he is a pregnant woman, whose child cannot breathe and will certainly die. He might share some knowledge of America with his mother through the umbilical cord which links them, but beyond that, as a dream sent by Michael, on a deeper level, Able's memories become all mixed up with those of his sleeping mother, explaining his knowledge of America in addition to suggesting fertilization. The events of the book repeat some of the worst struggles which both the unfertilized sperm and the fertilized egg undergo during the troubled pregnancy. His initial memories of America come from his mother's subconscious and sleeping mind.

While there are many different events which might be used to illustrate the ubiquitous subtext, it is perhaps worth looking at Able's visit to the Room of Lost Love, where lost things might be found, according to the Angrborn. In penetrating to the depths of that room to meet with the Mythgarthr cognate of his mother, long dead in the surface narrative, Able experiences a great watery abyss:

Night blacker than the blackest night of storm enveloped us. I heard the rush of waters, as I had when I had breasted tides and dark, uncharted currents with Garsecg. There was a great pounding, swift and very deep. I tried to imagine what sort of creature might make such a noise, and the image that leaped into my mind was that of Org, green as leaves and brown as bark, alone in a forest clearing and pounding the trunk of a hollow tree with a broken limb (Wolfe, *Wizard* 259).

The strange and violently destructive mother figure who accompanies him into the Room of Lost Loves, Lynnet, claims that the pounding they hear is the beating of her heart, but Able claims, “As soon as she spoke, ... I knew she was right and wrong, that it was my own heart, not hers” (259). This is as close as the text comes to the outright admission that Lynnet is in a way Able’s anima, and though she will come to represent the lost mother and become less angry and destructive, her transformation is ultimately because of Able’s increasing incorporation of these archetypes into his own personality. The darkness parts in pearly mist, and Able sees grass. Lynnet recognizes it as her home, Goldenlawn. Able thinks, “[I]t was a place very easy to love, and made me think, all the while that I was there, of the Lady’s hall in Skai. The Lady’s Folkvanger stands to it as a blossoming tree to a single violet, but they breathed the same air” (260). Lynnet introduces Able to her family, her sister Leesha who died in childbirth, her father Lord Leifr who was slain by Frost Giants, and her mother Lady Lis. She takes him to her mother’s grotto. “It made me think of the cave in which I had lain on moss with Disiri, but I said nothing of that” (260). Lynnet fears it, as she was not allowed inside that grotto when she was young. Able finds a rough tunnel there, and, proceeding alone, almost inexplicably finds his talking cat, Mani. Able says, “Some of these people are dead, and it doesn’t seem to make any difference” (261). Able smells the sea with Mani in his arms, and he is not certain if the grotto he

approaches represents going forward or back the way he came. Mani calls out that there is a woman there, and Able finds Parka, who initially gave him the strange string and instructed him to plant a seed. She tells him that he must put the string away from him when he sleeps and points beyond the breakers. Able must leave behind his mail and sword to reach it.

Able eventually comes to understand that only lost loves can be found here; he then arrives at the Isle of Glas. A peasant woman there says that he is her son, and that Berthold and he suckled at her breasts. She extends a tube of green glass to him, telling him to read the letter within it; its language is that of the country of the heart. In an earlier dream, Able pictured swimming through just such a tube. Able notes, “You will wonder, Ben, as I wondered, whether she was not our mother as well as Berthold’s and his brother’s. I think that she was both” (263). These kinds of statements can produce elaborate theories about the conduit between Earth and Mythgarthr, but a more archetypal union makes much more sense of the entire time Able spends in this strange room, where the living and dead interact freely – this is his chance to commune with a mother whom Able will never know in the waking world; in order to grow he must come to embrace and understand the very idea of maternal affection in the process of Jungian individuation.

The letter Able reads describes her pregnancy and the coming of Garsecg, with his illusions and lies, demanding worship. The inhuman Garsecg even claims that Mag could never give birth without the permission of the gods of Aelfrice. “I begged the Lady of Skai to take my life if only she would spare my child. I was able to bear him, and I named him Able because of it” (264). Readers finally learn the surface reason for Able’s name, and his final denial of the name Able on the final pages will ring much more powerfully when it is understood what he is actually denying: he will never be able to be born.

In what becomes a symbolically important moment, Able asks if he might take the scroll, but Mag says that nothing he takes from the Room of Lost Love will remain with him. She also says the letter Able is reading is actually still on the Isle of Glas outside in the larger world, and when Able reaches his fingers into the green tube, his entire arm enters it. He finds himself running down a green tunnel, with Eterne slapping at his leg. When Able surrendered and found Disiri at last, he had to keep his hand on Eterne to keep it from slapping at his leg, drawing a parallel between leaving the Room of Lost Love and finding Disiri again. In this scene, the running Able actually seems to take the place of the letter, and that green glass tunnel leads him back into Mythgarthr. Able actually becomes the letter in this metaphorical enactment, and his “story” is all the message his mother’s unconscious mind will ever know of him.

The last extended scene of the novel involves Able’s healing of the rest of the cast, which includes giving sight to the blind, straightening the crooked, and returning his “brother” Bold Berthold to health. Present in this scene, the Valfather tells Able that he is finished, and then forbids that Able should end his own life: “You will die when Winter and Old Knight whelm us. So will I. So will my son Thunor, who does not believe it. Meanwhile, I thank you for mending my dog. Shall I return Cloud?” (475). Able refuses the return of his flying horse (in Jungian terms, a symbol of endurance), and the Valfather asks if Able is coming back to Skai with him, saying that few are asked even once.

Able responds, “I am not Able.” He then casts his helm into the water, and goes with Disiri to Aelfrice, where they can act as children again. They have a puppy named Farvan, whom they speak to of “the play now past and the play to come” (477). Able closes his letter to his brother by claiming that the archangel Michael has found him, and that he has figured out how to deliver Able’s letter. The letter that Able writes, the entirety of the novel, is very similar to the

one which Mag proffers to him in the green glass which encompasses everything, through which he exits the Room of Lost Love. Like that letter, it is written in the language of the heart. Able's entire bittersweet existence, both dream and reality, afforded the chance to see himself as a great hero and experience something of life, is only given voice in the subconscious of his mother.

The Wizard Knight is not the only text in Gene Wolfe's illustrious career that uses mythological elements to mask far more biological events. The middle novella of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* and the short story "Peritonitis" are perfect examples of how Wolfe employs the tropes of adventure stories to overlay allegories of disease and infection, which actually occur on a very small biological scale. Here, that metaphorical approach to biology is turned to the numinous and miraculous start of a human life. However, even with an evaluation of the text as a Jungian palimpsest, there are still some difficult details to explain. Able's initial presence in America, with later mentions of teachers he knew, his Mac, and glimpses of situations which clearly occur on Earth, such as the dream of a machine gun and hijackers, all make the metaphorical experiences of his life more difficult to accept. While the hijackers mentioned in at least one dream might be just another metaphor for the biological processes at work under the surface, when brother encroaches upon brother, a mimetic representation of the same invasion we see in the surface story as a fantasy metaphor, they could be based in events from his living brother's future life, justifying Able's sacrifice so that his brother could be born.

The final pages of the novel reveal that Michael has found a way to deliver Able's "letter" – and there might be no way to do that other than in the dreams he sends to Able's brother and mother. When Able first arrives in Mythgarthr, he supposes that he can somehow return home to his brother, but questions its wisdom:

[A]t that time I believed I would be home soon. I had been kidnapped, I thought, by the Aelf. They had freed me in some western state, or perhaps in a foreign country. In time, the memories of my captivity would return. ... You would get married, and I would be in the way all the time until I was old enough to live on my own. The best plan might be for me to stay out at the cabin, for the first year anyway. It might be better still for me not to come home too quickly. Home to the bungalow that had been Mom and Dad's. Home to the cabin where we had gone to hunt and fish before snow ended all that. (Wolfe, *Knight* 33)

Even in these early ruminations, the threat of cold and snow serves as an ending. When he talks with Bold Berthold, he even begins to doubt the veracity of his memories:

I was confused already, memories of home mingling with stories Bold Berthold had told me of the family here that had been his and was supposed to be mine. It was all in the past, and although America is very far from here in the present, the past is only memories, and records nobody reads, and records nobody can read. This place and that place are mixed together like the books in the school library, so many things on the wrong shelf that nobody knows what is right for it anymore. (39)

Able does have a valid link to the experiences his mother had in the form of his umbilical cord, which, coincidentally, also serves as his link to the lives of Earth, if readers accept that Parka's bowstring serves that purpose. In addition, if he truly lives only in her dreams, then those memories of America can result in being "all mixed up" with his mother's own childhood, as the very opening chapter suggests. It is important that Jung's conception of archetypes and myths be understood in terms of the collective unconscious: the struggles and patterns that are repeated in the text, while they are informed by Able's limited experience, are part of the inheritance of

mankind. They pre-exist conscious thought. The most surprising source suggests that even the world of dreams and the unconscious reflections Able perceives are highly ordered, because they, too, are somehow true in spirit. When Able confronts the most low god, he hears that he has “come near the secret that lies at the heart of all things” (Wolfe, *Wizard* 422).

The most low god emphasizes the difference between perceptions and reality, and the reality of the most low god’s existence is described as an amalgamation of everything that Able has been narrating, a monster that sees itself as the only thing in creation. Its lies are not entirely mistaken, but they are misguided, for there is something *outside* of its closed system. Able’s awareness, whether supernatural or not, of life in America is like a small gift, a connection with the outside world towards which he can strive. Linear time means very little in this Jungian dream logic, as the same patterns and motifs are repeated over and over to slowly unveil their original cause.

Seeing himself inside the most low god on a throne of ice, trapped with the Earl Marshal, is actually a succinct and clear visual image of Able’s actual physical condition. This truly is the secret of the text: Able’s only freedom is of the mind and spirit; his body is trapped, and the fires of life threaten to abandon him, leaving only ice and death behind. When the most low god tells him, “Know the great secret, which is that the last world is the first - ... You stand in Niflheim, and Elysion,” readers are right to be skeptical of the knowledge. The back of the most low god is but a rotting mess, though he proclaims it to be true divinity. As I have always insisted, even lies in Wolfe stories are usually somehow true, and Lothur suggests that the most low god actually does grant wishes in such a way that one would prefer not to have them come true. In these novels, the last world is the first: before coming to the womb of Mythgarthr and Aelfrice, Able seemed to dwell in Earth, but it was yet another presentiment, a dream of a potential waiting for

him after his time in the womb, a vision of what might be for when he entered the true final world of reality. However, Able's sacrifice, and the loss of Cloud and Mani, suggest that his gift consists of living out an unconscious fantasy, the inheritance of humanity in all of its glory and pain, where monstrous myths reflect real feelings, and a fierce struggle for existence is felt without being fully understood. The transferring of the cat Mani's allegiance to Idnn, as she comes to represent true growth and development, does not mean that Able is left destitute, but it does mean that he has relinquished a symbol of selfishness, leaving it behind him as he matures, learning from the archetypes and incorporating their virtues into the development of his person. The first world Able knew, inside his mother's womb, becomes his final world, too, as he lives on only in her dreams. Indeed, many of these memories are probably best understood as the memories of the little girl he is "mixed up" with – a designation that works just as well for his mother as for Disiri in a spiritual sense.

After the most low god's revelation, the inexplicable twinning of the Earl Marshal occurs, as he wishes that he could sit in Aelfrice forever, looking at the sky and enjoying the simple life. Like much in Wolfe, this serves a double purpose. Not only does it emphasize the creation of a twin that was suggested when the shadow dropped off of Bold, but it also symbolizes a spiritual and a material existence. Able may sacrifice the life of his physical body, but even unborn, his soul still exists, and will continue even beyond Ragnarök.

When they return to Celidon, Able and the Earl Marshal learn that Arnthor is dead (erroneously) and that the Osterlings rule, but that image, of the Earl Marshal somehow twinned and staying in Aelfrice while a copy ascends to Mythgarthr, is another perfect metaphor showing (but never telling) what Able has experienced. Even in the ruins of Celidon, something remains. Physically, Ben will continue on, incorporating many of his brother's parts in his own continuing

struggle. Spiritually, Able is not entirely snuffed out – there is more than oblivion even to the unborn, whose struggle for life begins long before they leave the womb.

The overturning of the surface plot does not betray the romantic and chivalrous ideals of the story, as Able's perceptions are real: they allow him to learn, grow, and develop, but the elements of myth are ultimately referring to him and his personal struggle. This reinforces that myths are not simply abstract and arbitrary lies without any vestige of truth. They are about very real struggles and hardships; everyone who has ever been born has overcome almost insurmountable odds. The harsh competition that marks the start of all life truly is strange and miraculous; at its heart, the continuation of humanity is based around both lust and love, light and darkness. Able must suffer and die, but his sacrifice is poignantly triumphant as well, for it allows someone else to live the life he might have had. Myths are about the beauty of life, and the fact that humans are here, living and breathing, implies that sometime, somewhere, someone made a sacrifice for them, too, to defend the vulnerable – no human child is born with the ability to survive on its own. Perhaps if humans could see each other clearly, the face of every enemy that they fight might be that of a brother, too. Able's story, for all its particulars, is universal, and this dissertation can attempt to answer at least one of the questions he poses rhetorically: the dream his mother had is all around us, of life and joy and striving against nothingness.

While much more time could be spent on proving that Wolfe consciously employs the shifting tropes of Romanticism over time in *Castleview* or in delineating exactly how the chimeric twinship of Able and Ben in *The Wizard Knight* underlies almost every aspect of the text, the more important takeaway involves Wolfe's relationship to myth and tradition. While he is capable of writing sociological fiction with mimetic qualities, his characters often flirt with archetypal and symbolic associations. The techniques well-suited to making ethical judgments

about main characters such as Able fall flat when the reader does not understand that the biological needs being symbolized supersede character motivation. Able cannot behave humanely without dying in his struggle to be born, as he is constantly deprived of the means to live. When he does finally mature and surrender his advantage, it is with a poignant finality that the surface text can only hint at. In such an archetypal story, the sexual attraction female characters have for Able resonate with the perilous pregnancy; the call of the Norn hounds brings death. A reader might be quick to suppose that these female characters operate as sirens, and while they might, the larger biological connotation of sexual reproduction, fraternal competition, and premature death dominate the themes and patterns which run throughout the text in a very particular and genre-specific fashion. Despite Wolfe's often unconventional narrative techniques, meaning is created when readers trust that the existing tradition and the structures of the human mind and universal experience inform the gaps in the text.

Chapter Four: The Artist's Sketch or the Engineer's Scaffold?

The previous chapters assert a certainty in plot related conclusions which are features of subtext rather than text, though they are often grounded in quite literal readings.¹² The existing critics of Wolfe generally fall into two general camps concerning his work. Some maintain that his art is ultimately open, inviting multiple interpretations and many valid readings. However, there are many who posit that there are definite solutions to his puzzles, and that a logical and concise method of approaching his fiction will reveal previously unclear resolutions. In considering whether Wolfe's work fits the pattern of an avant-garde artist's sketch, with the unclear portions susceptible to an almost infinite branch of responses, permutations, and almost jazz-like riffs on a theme, or if his work is more like the carefully calculated and precise plan of an engineering platform, it is still possible to consider that some of his puzzles might be, for all intents and purposes, insoluble.

Gene Wolfe's most famous cycle of books, which could easily occupy hundreds of pages of exegesis, is made up of three distinct series over twelve volumes and is often called the Solar Cycle. A full thematic evaluation of it would be impossible within the scope of this dissertation, let alone this chapter, but there are two important features of the text which I hope to emphasize. The first is that Wolfe's theology is, despite the obvious difficulty of modern readers in approaching the moral implications of his great work, as orthodox in its Catholicism as can be imagined. The first series of four books and a coda was published under the umbrella title *The*

¹² Able actually uses "I" in his dream of a pregnant woman – taking this entire scene extremely literally, while viewing the action through a symbolic or archetypal lens, draws us to the conclusion that these events actually do occur in the dream of a once-pregnant woman who has lost one of her twin sons. It is the switching of the literal and the metaphorical which many readers of Gene Wolfe seem incapable of logically grasping: will a certain scene make more sense of the story if its code and function is perceived differently? Wolfe's mysteries surround matters of plot, which are far different than details of reception or representation.

Book of the New Sun. In a far future setting known as Urth (named after the Norn goddess governing the past), the torturer's apprentice Severian is cast out of his guild for having mercy on one of his prisoners. Of course, this mercy actually involves slipping her a knife so that her torture might be cut short. He is exiled from his guild to wander across a dying-earth setting as the sun sputters in its tracks, but hope exists that an Autarch, the ruler of the commonwealth, might someday pass the test of a possibly alien race known as the Hierodules and bring a New Sun to stave off eternal night. The series proceeds as a picaresque journey, until Severian finds himself in the position of the Autarch facing the Hierodule's test. It seems that they have been searching backwards in time to influence the evolution of humanity so that their own creators, the Hieros and Hierogrammates, might evolve from humanity or one of its previous cognates. Of course, cause and effect are dreadfully complicated by this time twisting, and, eventually, the coming of the New Sun winds up producing cataclysmic floods and unprecedented loss of life on Urth, which will be reborn as Ushas.

Nick Gevers insists that the denouement of the series is ultimately subversive in nature: Many actions undertaken by Severian are motiveless or circular; the eventual resolution of his quest, the bringing of the New Sun to Urth, is more destructive than redemptive. The reader soon perceives that Wolfe is writing a subversive text, seeking to suggest not the simple solutions and resolutions of a linear quest, but rather their opposites, the doubts, the acknowledgements of imperfection and inconclusiveness, stemming from a darker view of the world. Wolfe utilizes the simple archetypes of Fantasy in order to argue the existence of teleology and virtue in the cosmos; but he is concerned equally to reveal the uncertainties and terrors engendered by human imperfection, by our pitifully

weak understanding of our own natures, let alone of Divine plans and glorious destinies.

Severian is a flawed hero, because he is the servant of an inscrutable God. (Gevers 2-3)

Indeed, Gevers calls *The Book of the New Sun* a metafiction of both literary and religious subversion, and his overarching aim is to “reveal Wolfe’s doctrine of uncertainty – a phrase in itself indicative of the paradoxes of Wolfe’s work” (3). He also describes the movement of the hero Severian as a doomed quest to approach the Divine, when life actually represents an enigma which can never be pierced, nor can the Increate, as God is called in the series, be brought closer to the realm of human comprehension

While there have actually been several approaches to Wolfe’s most popular series, it seems that the critical response to the conclusion of *The Urth of the New Sun* in general is to identify its conclusion as horrific, callous, terrible, or outright deceptive. Peter Wright’s entire book-length study of *The Book of the New Sun* boils down to blaming the Hierodules for manipulating humanity and foisting a false religion upon the hapless humans involved. In his analysis, the Hierodules are equally bereft of any special insight into the will of the Increate, which serves as something of a distraction and a tool for manipulation. Gevers, too, takes a negative view of Wolfe’s overarching cosmological tone throughout the volumes:

In constructing his labyrinthine narrative, Wolfe offers suggestions as to why a universe governed by God - Severian's 'Increate' - should be so darkly illumined, so bereft of ready understanding of the Divine Will. In Cabbalistic terms, our universe, known to Severian as 'Briah', is vouchsafed only imperfect or incomplete versions of the Holy Word, or the emanations that symbolize God to the worlds. As Severian himself explains in an early conversation with his lover Dorcas, 'everything, whatever happens, has three meanings', - a practical meaning', or an everyday significance; a soothsayer's meaning', reflecting

relationships with other objects; and a 'transubstantial meaning', reflecting the Divine Will (ST, 272). (Gevers 4)

While this might characterize some of the events that occur in the novel, which at times achieve symbolic or transubstantial resonance, it does not actually acknowledge the quite orthodox Augustinian Theodicy that permeates the series at almost every turn. As Severian says of human actions, “whether all that came to good or evil, I don't know. Until we reach the end of time, we don't know whether something's been good or bad; we can only judge the intentions of those who acted” (Wolfe, *Urth of the New Sun* 237). The same might be said of the destruction of Urth, which, whatever it does to humanity as it once was, is definitely not the frozen end that the winking out of the sun would represent. Influenced as he was by Platonism and Neoplatonism, this is actually a parroting of St. Augustine's epistemology of knowledge. According to St. Augustine, knowledge of the world is difficult, but the world itself is a reflection of higher, more immutable truths, related to the divine. One of the key points of Augustine's theology involves the idea that no human can judge truth or falsehood concerning the divine, but that there is a plan which can make of human choices a greater end in accordance with the divine will, such that even evil can come eventually to serve good. In the *Enchiridion*, Augustine asserts that evil, which lacks a created substance, is a feature of the corruption of a greater good and is actually the privation or absence of good rather than a thing in itself. In his assessment, eventually the will of God supersedes the implications of the human possibility of choosing evil by turning away from good:

But, however strong the wills either of angels or of men, whether good or evil, whether they will what God willeth or will something else, the will of the Omnipotent is always undefeated. And this will can never be evil, because even when it inflicts evils, it is still

just; and obviously what is just is not evil. Therefore, whether through pity "he hath mercy on whom he willeth," or in justice "whom he willeth, he hardeneth," the omnipotent God never doth anything except what he doth will, and doth everything that he willeth.

In many ways the Solar Cycle is the expression of a plan that prevents ultimate extinction, and the knowledge of the humans or the Hierodules involved in its execution is theologically irrelevant.

Much of the existing critical discourse on *The Book of the New Sun* actually involves the rather explicit and concrete conclusions presented at the end of *The Urth of the New Sun*, a volume which Wolfe did not originally want to write. This addition to *The Book of the New Sun* begins with Severian already aboard the ship which will take him to his trial, having just recopied the entirety of his original manuscript from memory. In many ways, the novel is an outgrowth of the conclusion of *The Citadel of the Autarch*, where we learn something of the cyclical nature of this universe:

Just as a flower blooms, throws down its seed, dies, and rises from its seed to bloom again, so the universe we know diffuses itself to nullity in the infinitude of space, gathers its fragments (which because of the curvature of that space meet at last were they began) and from that seed blooms again. Each such cycle of flowering and decay marks a divine year.

As the flower that comes is like the flower from which it came, so the universe that comes repeats the one whose ruin was its origin; and this is as true of its finer features as of its grosser ones: The worlds that arise are not unlike the worlds that perished, and are

peopled by similar races, though just as the flower evolves from summer to summer, all things advance by some minute step. (Wolfe, *Sword and Citadel* 384)

This imagery of a flower blooming and dying so that the next generation can thrive is innately married to the imagery used to describe humanity in a pivotal play recorded in *The Book of the New Sun*, "Eschatology and Genesis." In that play, a character known as the Contessa desires to mate with the character of Meschiane, so that her line, that of humanity, can be at least partially preserved in the future. She is described as of exalted blood and accused of witchcraft in the play. When she glimpses a lean stranger on the Road of Air, she comments, "No, on this strange night, when we, who are the winter-killed stalks of man's old sprouting, find ourselves so mixed with next year's seed, I fear that he is something more we do not know" (Wolfe, *Shadow and Claw* 364). When that prophetic scene actually occurs at the end of *The Urth of the New Sun*, readers realize that the Contessa describes Severian, whose identity as the New Sun circumvents the coming of an eternal winter. Here, her knowledge and fear do not undercut the fact that the winter-killed stalks will succeed in mixing with "next year's seed" rather than being extinguished forever.

The Book of the New Sun also presents the idea that the Hieros are a result of the human race finally transcending its limitations by reaching Yesod:

[W]hat had been made was not a new race like Humanity's, but a race such as Humanity wished its own to be: united, compassionate, just. I was not told what happened to the Humanity of that cycle Perhaps it evolved beyond our recognition. But the beings Humanity had shaped into what men and women wished to be escaped, opening a passage to Yesod, the universe higher than our own, where they created worlds suited to

what they had become. ... Perhaps it was we who shaped them - or our sons - or our fathers. (Wolfe, *Sword and Citadel* 385)

The Urth of the New Sun shows the completion of one such cycle, when the coming of Severian's White Fountain creates enough light for the Green Man, humanity's successor, to thrive and develop, cutting off a possible ice-bound future. However, one of the destinies which arises from this cyclic pattern includes humanity transforming into something completely unrecognizable; in order for the new flower to bloom, the old must scatter its seeds where it might and pass away. The justice of the Hierogrammates allows the memory and spirit of humanity to avoid complete oblivion, preserved in the new creation, and this merciful exemption from oblivion seems to motivate them in aiding Severian, who claims to forget nothing.

I shall return to the consequence of the climax of *Urth of the New Sun* below, but first it is worth looking at Peter Wright's completely secular understanding of the text at length. In *Attending Daedalus*, Wright claims:

Wolfe exploits his reader's awareness of the direction of the plot by enlisting his or her powers of recollection (the reader knows Severian is Autarch from the beginning of *The Shadow of the Torturer*) and by employing a prefigurative title for his concluding volume, *The Urth of the New Sun*. As White observes, 'titles remain the most direct narrative device the author can choose to trigger off a prefigurative pattern', and, in this case, the title of *The Urth of the New Sun* serves to remove any indeterminacy concerning the possibility of Severian's success. From the outset, the title of Wolfe's final volume is an implicit comment on the preordained masquerade to which the reader is witness; it is certain that Urth will be granted a New Sun. However, the title may be perceived by the reader not as indicative of the artificiality of Severian's progression from torturer to

messiah, but as a thematic element. White accounts for this phenomenon by stating: ‘We are accustomed to associate titles with main themes and may be unable to see the modern use of prefigurative titles from the right perspective.’ In the case of *The Urth Cycle*, the right perspective is gained by those readers who recognise [sic] that such a prefiguration alludes to the Hierogrammates’ schemes.

White notes that

[a] complete pattern of mythological correspondences covering the whole of a novel is bound to generate a far greater mood of inexorability. Events then appear to be following some preordained course for which a familiar analogy assumes the role almost of an influence, and the prefiguration seems to retain its former religious aura.

The monomythic prefiguration of *The Urth Cycle* functions precisely in this manner. The reader is seemingly required to follow Severian’s tracks somewhat doggedly, recognising [sic] analogies to culture heroes and other fictional protagonists, while being encouraged to believe that the narrative is, in some vague way, a religious parable. However, the cautious, reflective reader may recognise [sic] such an extensive prefiguration as a structural clue used by Wolfe to indicate how Severian’s life is being rescripted by the Hierogrammates, through the agency of the Claw and other celestial sleights of hand. In other words, Severian’s life follows a mythic pattern because the Hierogrammates have contrived it to follow that mythic pattern. (122)

Wright’s assessment here completely fails to consider two very important aspects of Catholic theology. One of them involves the relative importance of “works” in addition to “faith.” The Protestant Reformation emphasized faith alone as the transcendent cornerstone to renewal and salvation, but Wolfe is operating out of an explicitly Catholic worldview. Indeed, every human

character in the novel is named after a Catholic saint. These are more than mere mythic patterns. Here, Wright claims that the relic Severian receives, the Claw of the Conciliator, is nothing but a tool of the Hierodules to manipulate Severian. However, when they meet at last, the Hieros are quick to exclaim that it is a mere trinket, and that it cannot have performed the miracles Severian ascribes to it. Their disdain for the relic is clear, and later, we learn that it is only powerful because, in the twisted timeline, the thorn at the heart of the gem was once saturated in Severian's blood – it is not the relic which produced the miracles, but the relationship between Severian and the higher plane of existence, known as Yesod, where he engenders the white fountain. The Claw simply does not serve the function Wright claims as an intentionally established focus for false religious sentiment– it is a MacGuffin that acquires the significance of a true relic. The second element Wright overlooks involves free will, which he actually denies as a possibility in the text:

Unfortunately, as a consequence of what Campbell sees as the universal status of the monomyth, critics have overlooked Wolfe's ironic recontextualisation [sic], seized on the mythic elements of the narrative and pronounced it a mythoplasm, ignoring the deceptive role that the heroic cycle fulfils. Peter Nicholls, for example, considers Wolfe as *[the] metaphysical poet of science fiction; he has a great deal in common with Donne or Marvell [and] the references [in The Urth of the New Sun] to Dante's great work [La Commedia] are appropriate enough, for The Urth of the New Sun is as much a description of a spiritual pilgrimage as it is of a physical voyage ... The Urth of the New Sun is a vigorous story of a flight through time and space, a judgement, a return to an Urth of an earlier era, a brief period at the end of the world, and finally the beginning of a new world. On the spiritual level the book is quite astonishing ... Lame Severian is not*

merely the Fisher King, he is the Redeemer, the Christ. Severian, though he may be assisted by the Increate, is his own man. He has Free Will ...

Falling victim to Wolfe's recontextualisation [sic] of form and symbol, Nicholls is simply wrong in his reading of the text. Severian is neither the Fisher King nor Christ since, as White observes, 'a character within a novel cannot be a mythological god in the literal sense'. Nicholls's discovery of Severian's Free Will, an astounding achievement considering the puppet/ actor imagery surrounding Wolfe's protagonist, whose actions are, at best, reactions to events instigated by 'powers from above the stage', reduces his argument to the level of assertion. (123)

Wright here asserts that Nichol's more orthodox reading of the text is "simply wrong," and it is with some relish that I reformulate this into an equally insufferable turn of phrase: Wright's entire Naturalistic approach to the text is "wrong," according to his own understandings of intentionality. His regurgitation of White's claim that a character in a novel can never be a literal god ignores a genre rife with novels featuring gods, from stories by Neil Gaiman to Roger Zelazny and even Wolfe himself. Beyond that, many of the most central ruminations of the text involve the idea of choice: at the "trial" Severian faces, the reanimated essences of his most fierce enemies choose to defend him. Wright continues:

John Clute is similarly entangled in Wolfe's associational material and the monomythic prefiguration, suggesting that 'Severian is both Apollo and Christ and that the story of his life is a secular rendering of the parousia, the Second Coming. His cruelty ... is the cruelty of the universe itself ...'. Like Nicholls, Clute fails to draw the important distinction between Severian's carefully rendered resemblance to Christ and Apollo and the impossibility of his being either. Together, they accept the pentalogy's symbolism as

indicative of its assumed symbolist qualities rather than as a deflective plot in Wolfe's elaborate interpretative game. In asserting that Severian is Christ, Apollo and the Fisher King, Nicholls and Clute ignore the fact that Severian's resemblance to these figures confirms the artificiality of the Hierogrammates' mythogenesis, and suggests, albeit elliptically, that much of human mythology has been constructed using recurrent mythic patterns.

Clute's analysis is, however, more penetrating than Nicholls's appreciation. He recognises [sic] Severian's 'parousia' as 'secular', as something worldly rather than spiritual, indirectly expanding on his earlier understanding that 'the miracle' in *The Book of the New Sun* 'is that Severian is allowed to perform a miracle' (*Strokes*, p. 151).

Unfortunately, Clute does not capitalise [sic] on either of these observations, and his suggestion that Severian's 'cruelty ... is the cruelty of the universe itself' is simply ambiguous rhetoric which may, or may not, imply the Darwinian laws governing Severian's cosmos. (122-3)

This then, invokes the social Darwinism which dominates Wright's entire thesis: to him, Severian is a simple pawn moved by forces he cannot understand. The denouement of *Urth of the New Sun* features a cataclysmic flood that destroys vast swathes of humanity, and Severian returns from the Corridors of Time years afterward to find that he and several others have become local deities. Wright over-emphasizes the euhemeric transformation of historical events into myth in his final assessment:

In an interview with Wolfe, Darrell Schweitzer seems to stumble on the significant point that Nicholls and Clute overlook:

It seems to me that the document Severian has produced will be remembered in his world not as an autobiography or historical memoir but as a great myth. It will become like Homer's works and might even be the basis of a religion.

Schweitzer's remarks are important since they draw attention to the way in which 'Severian's autobiography' could affect its own world while suggesting implicitly that the text should be read differently by contemporary readers. (124)

Wright refuses to engage the very prominent religious themes at work in the text. *Urth of the New Sun* addresses this directly: "You're a materialist, like all ignorant people. But your materialism doesn't make materialism true" (Wolfe, *Urth of the New Sun* 361). Eventually, no matter how much causality can be traced back to the Hieros, the text reaches beyond them to genuine myth, which, to the structural sensibilities of Wolfe, are not falsehoods but are stories with immense and transcendent power to explain the mysteries of human and divine existence. In a truly Augustinian sense, there is no eternal life without death, no redemption without a fall, and there is nothing in the text that fails to resonate with that theodicy and the idea of the divine plan. Throughout *The Book of the New Sun*, Severian's fiercest enemies wind up preserving him – bent on his demise, it is the femme fatale Agia who winds up saving Severian from seemingly inescapable death in the fourth volume. Similarly, when he is certain to die at the hands of an indigenous group of mystics, an extraterrestrial lifeform sent to destroy him winds up allowing his escape. Even the most bizarre creature in the text, the alzabo, which can speak with the voices and memories of those it has eaten, rushes to save the family members of one such victim from an autochthonous tribe (so that the family might be reunited inside itself, though here, the two threats destroy each other.) The destruction of Urth, too, is less complete than the ultimate darkness of night, though it is inscrutable to the human beings who have to suffer as a result of

the events which have occurred. Wright's reading leaves no mark of the transcendent and numinous themes which absolutely saturate the text from start to finish.

During Severian's trial, one of the sailors from Urth who attempts to kill Severian confesses that it is common knowledge that the coming of the New Sun heralds disaster for humanity's home, and many of the sailors are reluctant to see their old home purged and threatened. Much of Wright's emphasis on the manipulation of the Hieros assumes that they are something like the enemy of mankind, but he does not incorporate the constantly repeated motifs of the terrible serving a higher purpose. The passing of Severian's trial involves his enemies fighting for him.

Analysis of the work is also complicated by the fact that the original Severian's body seems to die, with the Hierogrammates then maintaining him in a corporeal, tangible form, eventually creating a new physical body to house the spirit which has been preserved. Despite this reliance on external forces to avoid the finality of death, the power which Severian wields to heal and alter the reality of ancient Urth after the kindling of the White Fountain on Yesod still seems to be beyond the ken of the Hierodules: "[O]nly the Increate is God, kindling reality and blowing it out. All the rest of us, even Tzadkiel, can only wield the forces he's created" (Wolfe, *Urth of the New Sun* 353). Severian's lamentations over one of his bodies are rendered hollow by the mere fact that he can actually give voice to them: those who can complain of their death are not truly extinguished.

Severian's trial is based upon the perceptions of those he has knowingly and unknowingly caused to suffer in the past. Their idolons are given the choice to defend him or not as the paragon of Urth who will bring the New Sun, fighting for the future against the group of sailors who find themselves thrust into championing the past. Severian recognizes himself in the

memories of those summoned here to fight as "a horrible yet benign presence" (126). When he sees their apparitions, he proclaims, "Justice! ... I tried to act justly, and you know that! You may hate me, but can you say I harmed you without cause?" (131) Even those who have reason to hate him concur, for they fight the living sailors. In the symbolic struggle, Master Ash, dweller in a future house frozen on a dead Urth in which the New Sun does not come, is at last put to rest: "Dr. Talos cut a dead man's robe to wipe the blade of his cane sword, and I saw that the dead man was Master Ash" (155). While Severian denies that he has summoned these people to fight for him, Apheta hints that he has. The goal of their fight is, "Not for the Urth you have known. ... For a New Urth man will never see, except through your eyes and the eyes of others who recall them" (161).

The symbiotic relationship between what humanity once was and what it may become is emphasized in his discussion with the larval being Severian mates with in Yesod:

"The Hierarchs and their Hierodules - and the Hierogrammates too - have been trying to let us become what we were. What we can be. ... That's their justice, their whole reason for being. They bring us through the pain we brought them through. And -" ...

Apheta said, "You in turn will make us go through what you did. ... Your race and ours are, perhaps, no more than each other's reproductive mechanisms. You are a woman, and so you say you produce your ovum so that there will someday be another woman. But your ovum would say it produces that woman so that someday there will be another ovum. ... In saving your race [the New Sun] has saved ours; as we have saved ours of the future by saving yours." (160)

Nowhere else in Wolfe's story will such a clear explanation of the motives behind the coming of the New Sun be given, and we finally see the manner in which Severian's memory justifies his

position as the head of his race - though their physical accomplishments, ambitions, and remains may have been washed away, something of humanity lives on in his memory. Severian contains all that is left of what humanity once was. When he restates that he has always remembered everything, the Hierodules confide, "For that were you chosen, Severian. You and you alone from many princes. You alone to save your race from lethe" (353).

In the final scenes of the novel Severian returns to the future Urth, known as Ushas, to find a primitive culture worshipping his memory as the Sleeper, a fish god whose manifestation as death allows those who survive to avoid starvation in a world of scant resources. When Severian asks where his companions who escaped the flooding of Nessus dwell, the final line of his narrative shows how the philosophy of Ushas's burgeoning religion questions the finality of death, without robbing it of its power, as he is directed to three bowers: "'There,' my priest told me. 'There the other gods sleep'" (370).

In the almost three decades since the completion of the sequence, readers of *The Book of the New Sun* and its coda cannot even agree if it is an indictment of religion and mysticism or something which ultimately reinforces the universal and pervasive need to seek out that which is higher, leading to true transcendence. Can suffering and evil be justified or redeemed by a greater good? This ambiguity in Severian's character and in the epiphanies that he experiences are rarely approached through the lens of Christian and Catholic Theodicy, though echoes of Augustinian thought permeates the text and Severian's own approach to the mysterious events of his life. To a materialistic, post-Enlightenment reader, the transformation and salvation presented in the text through destruction is a hard concept to appreciate. Has Severian done the will of a greater good, or merely been the tool of creatures who want to ensure that they themselves supplant mankind? The completely traditional answer espoused by the text is that whether

individuals act for good or ill, the will of the Increate is eventually done. On an individual level, Severian continually asserts that the only understanding flawed and temporal mortals can realistically hope to achieve involves the concept that an action's intention is more important than its result.

Severian is certain that, "The sky people - the Hierodules and Hierarchs - do not hate us. It is only that they are remote from us, and they fear us because of things we did before, long ago when our race was young. ... I have effected a conciliation - brought them nearer us and us nearer them, I think" (204). This (re)conciliation between the two, it is suggested, will allow both the Hieros to come into being and perhaps permit humanity to gain access to the higher existence of Yesod. Despite those very clear words, Severian does not yet fully comprehend by this point that the old structures must be washed away, with Urth destined to become only the memory of an antiquated yesterday. As noted, Urth shares the name of the Norn in Norse mythology who governs the past, one of the fates. The Norns are located at a well beneath the ash tree Yggdrasil of Asgard, and this syncretism between Yggdrasil and the Tree of Life in the Kabbalah is certainly an intentional feature of Wolfe's cosmology. Even Master Ash is named in conjunction with Norse mythology. In *Castle of the Otter*, Wolfe states:

Thinking it a good omen to give the last man the name of the first, I have called him Ash, translating the Teutonic *Ask*. Ask's wife was Embla (Vine). Odin, Hoenir, and Lodur are said to have created this couple from a dead tree and its equally dead parasite, so their very existence indicates the hope of rebirth. (47)

The demons in "Eschatology and Genesis" spoke at length about what the coming of the New Sun would mean for humanity, and also speculated on Jahi's motivations:

First Demon: To people these lands, a new race is prepared. The humankind you know will be shouldered aside even as the grass, that has prospered on the plain so long, yields to the plow and so gives way to wheat.

Second Demon: But what if the seed were burned? What then? The tall man and the slight woman you met not long ago are such seed. Once it was hoped that it might be poisoned in the field, but she who was dispatched to accomplish it has lost sight of the seed now among the dead grass and broken clods, and for a few sleights of hand has been handed over to your Inquisitor for strict examination. Yet the seed might be burned still.

(Wolfe, *Shadow and Claw* 362)

Perhaps the watery demon Abaia's need to eliminate the free will of humanity, despite deterministic readings such as those Peter Wright brings to the solar cycle, is the difference between the Hierogrammates and the powers of the sea. While Tzadkiel and others might set in motion events which doom humanity in its old form, they do not seek to completely negate the higher faculties of justice and free will. At one point, Severian considers his own loyalties, and concludes that each choice in favor of one thing betrays something else: "As Thecla I had been false to my Autarch, as Severian to my guild. Gunnie had been loyal to me and to Urth, not to her comrades; and perhaps we are unable to advance some paragon of loyalty to an apothegm only because loyalty (in the final analysis) is choice" (Wolfe, *Urth of the New Sun* 263). Even emphasizing the importance of choice, however, the giant undine Juturna's commitment to saving Severian and humanity is still slightly troubling, unless it, too, represents the freedom of the undines to change, though Severian is all too willing to speculate on her nature when he casts a fish into the sea for her on Ushas: "[P]erhaps she is a demon to you. For most of my life I thought her a demon, too; it may be that neither you nor I have made a great mistake" (368).

Wright's entire presentation of the text as a game of manipulation ignores the overt spiritual goals of the novel, as far from materialism as can be imagined. As the Hierodules stress, the eidolon of Severian, though a copy, survives on its own: "Every living being is more than mere matter" (360). The death of Urth and of Severian is merely a translation to a higher state: "Perhaps death is only horrible to us because it's a dividing of the terror of life from the wonder of it. We see only the terror, which is left behind" (359). The limited, mortal point of view cannot fully appreciate the complex scheme beyond that of the material plane - which is only the smallest part of creation. This explicit theme of the novel is ignored by almost all of the dominant criticism, blinded by the sound and fury of a biblical flood that ultimately preserves on a longer time scale.

When asked if a man has the right to save his own life, Severian responds, "'Not under every circumstance,' ... I had not known the thought was in me until I had expressed it" (264). If something more noble or greater can be accomplished in dying, then perhaps the sacrifice must be made. He also speculates:

I think it may be a law binding even [the Increate] - that is to say, a logical necessity - that nothing can be eternal in the future that is not rooted in eternity in the past, as he himself is. And as I contemplated him in his joys and sorrows, it came to me that I was much like him, though so much smaller; thus an herb, perhaps, might think concerning a great cedar, or one of these innumerable drops of water about Ocean. (322)

This thought of an herb contemplating a great cedar brings to mind of one of Severian's first visions, at the very start of *The Shadow of the Torturer*. The coming of a miraculous light would engender such life: "a leaf plucked from a bush grew slender legs and waving feelers, and a rough brown brush opened black eyes and scurried up a tree" (Wolfe, *Shadow and Claw* 18). In

conjunction with the imagery of Yesod and the Tree of Life, the final goal of all the effort and energy being channeled into Briah is being spent so that humanity can climb up the Tree of Life and reach one step closer towards a reconciliation with that immense divinity, leaving behind a materialism that is only a tiny and unimportant part of reality.

When Severian finally reaches the future of Ushas, he perceives that two of the gods the people worship there must be evil, though certainly he has become a part of their mythology:

"First and greatest is the Sleeper. He is a man-god. He is always hungry. Once he devoured the whole land, and he may do so again if he is not fed. Though the Sleeper has drowned, he cannot die - thus he sleeps here on the strand. Fish belong to the Sleeper - you must beg his leave before you fish. ... All gods are very good, particularly the Sleeper! Without the Sleeper, so many would starve." (Wolfe, *Urth of the New Sun* 368)

Death, too, is necessary so that new life will thrive, though humans are preoccupied in its terror and seeming finality, paralyzed by the loss of the things they love and cherish. *The Urth of the New Sun* hints that the casting off of material remains is necessary for reaching something higher: the old must die so the new can eat; the body must be destroyed so that the spirit can be free to ascend, in this case to Yesod and the sephiroth of the Tree of Life. At the flooding of Urth, Severian says, "one who plants wheat kills grass" (303). So it is for Urth and humanity, with its yearning for transcendence and its capacity for corruption. He thinks of the tower of torture in which he grew up, and imagines it reaching a far higher fate:

How marvelous it would be to send this old Matachin Tower hurtling among the stars!
And yet there was something sinister about it, as about all things perverted from a noble purpose to a shameful one. I had grown to manhood here feeling nothing of that. (261)

Severian may realize that the spirit of Urth and humanity is much more than an unchanging body. Its death does not leave a rotting corpse behind, but it is rather transformed into something even more essential and true: "[S]ome events have no process, taking place at once: they are not - then are. So it was now. Imagine a man who stands before a mirror; a stone strikes it, and it falls to ruin all in an instant. And the man learns that he is himself, and not the mirrored man he had believed himself to be" (220).

The passing of humanity paves the way for the future that leads to the Green Man. The Green Man's name actualizes the comment made by Barbatus in *Urth of the New Sun*, a statement which will be echoed both at the culmination of *The Book of the Long Sun* and in *The Book of the Short Sun*, rife with significance. Confronted with the horror of Apu-Punchau's continued existence and the possibility of extinguishing himself, Severian declares, "We will live," and Barbatus responds, "We've known you half our lives now, Severian, and you're a weed that grows best when stepped upon" (356). Beneath the masks of horrors that the Hierodules wear are true faces of ethereal beauty. In this regard, Wolfe's symbolism does not betray the truth. The horrors and trials of life might excruciate and crush the body, but the ending of corporeal things is but a transitory torture, insignificant before the promise of the eternal spirit and the possibility of a reunion with a sublime force far beyond the current comprehension of humanity.

As I have already mentioned, great confusion over how to categorize Wolfe can be seen from multiple outlets. Murray Ewing, in "The Secret to Reading Gene Wolfe," asserts that there is no secret and that his books are best simply enjoyed. Other, more negative, writers, make stronger claims:

Critical texts devoted to Wolfe's work such as Michael Andre-Driussi's *Lexicon Urthus* :

A Dictionary for the Urth Cycle (1994) will reveal plenty of theories and hypotheses about the series as a whole but, when read in isolation it is impossible to present a coherent explanation or interpretation of the events in *The Shadow of the Torturer*. For all its metaphorical posturing, this is a book that is strangely free from meaning. It is a series of puzzles with no solutions. (McCalmont)

Contrary to these claims, Wolfe writes as an engineer: his mysteries are resolvable as long as the audience knows that the historical and religious significations actually work as objective signs. While the act of reading obviously involves the uncertainty of the linguistic enterprise, the manner in which Wolfe's texts are constructed, based on externally verifiable "facts" outside of the linguistic system, even if they are rooted in convention, creates some interesting questions about the actual subjectivity (or possibility) of a mimetic model. This comes down to the process of composition. As will be explored in the next two chapters, Wolfe's palimpsests truly can be treated as elaborate word problems.

In *Attending Daedalus*, Peter Wright attempts to establish Wolfe's fiction as an exercise in manipulation and mechanistic determinism from his very first novel *Operation Ares* onwards, identifying that negatively received book as a "seminal text, indicating Wolfe's burgeoning fascination with the motivating power of engineered myths and with hierarchical systems of manipulation and deception" (5). He also asserts:

From the beginning of his professional writing career, Gene Wolfe has expressed a fascination for a number of interrelated psychological phenomena that are significant to an understanding of his oeuvre. These phenomena include the subjective perception of ontological reality; the reconstruction of perceived reality from memory; the psychological manipulation of the individual within economic, political and spiritual

systems; the relationship between internal fantasy and external reality; and the psychological potency of myth, faith and symbolism. (23)

In addition to his misplaced lack of faith in the Oxford Comma, Wright also questions the validity of any of the religious imagery in Wolfe's book, almost always choosing to perceive it as naturalistic manipulation which highlights the lack of free will. Wright presents the observation of Peter Malekin, who claims, "The reader is given an imaginative inkling not only of a different world, but of a different mode of experiencing the fact of world as such, of any world" (14).

In his most bold claim about Wolfe's largest series, Wright claims that:

Behind the dramatic action of *The Urth Cycle* is a narrative of survival, not transcendence or spiritual growth, but a representation of the Darwinian principle which dictates that only those most able to adapt to a specific environment will survive. The reader is, therefore, confronted with a vision of cosmological natural selection which, because it is masterminded and consciously controlled by an alien race for its own evolutionary gain, becomes a revelation of authoritarianism. (70)

Wright disbelieves the final unmasking, in which the Hierodules, the aliens he refers to, are revealed as beings of preternatural beauty instead of rotting or insectoid figures of horror behind their original featureless masks and hoods. He attempts to see behind a play that actually has no backdrop because it is reality: the movement of all of the cycle is not towards a physical and natural continuance, but to a transformation archetypally identified with death and spiritual transcendence. The entire final volume, and perhaps even the entire series, emphasizes a dualistic sophistication which Wright never attempts to take seriously. When some people see death, they recognize only sorrow, loss, and a definitive ending, trapped by the terror of the body left behind

in death. Others are capable of recognizing that the pain of the broken thing left behind does not show any trace of the spirit freed to glory, which can never be destroyed, having fled elsewhere (or elsewhere in *The Book of the New Sun*, if we consider the time-traveling metaphors of this story, visualized as the Edenic Brook Madregot, through which characters might travel through time).

After attempting to crack some of the critical lenses others have used to discuss Wolfe (if shattering them is impossible), I would like to turn to my first major breakthrough in comprehension involving Wolfe's work, as I feel it truly emphasizes that Wolfe wrote his plot puzzles with very definite solutions in mind. From 1999 to 2001, Wolfe published the final volumes of his largest work, the three books in *The Book of the Short Sun*. I have already written extensively on their complexity outside the scope of this dissertation, but, in brief, they follow the plot of the *Book of the New Sun*, in which a terraformed moon and the Urth which springs from our own Earth are eventually subjected to a catastrophe in the form of a dying sun, which is rejuvenated at last with the power flowing from Yesod. In that cataclysmic renewal, the Urth is flooded. In the past, a two-headed tyrant named Typhon (the Satan figure of *The Book of the New Sun*, who tempts Severian in an allegorical scene which copies Christ's temptation in the desert almost line by line) spent his resources to create a generational ship, setting himself up as a digitized god in the closed environment along with his family. In *The Book of the Short Sun*, that ship has at last reached its destination, a hostile double planetary system known as Blue and Green to the people finally emerging from the Whorl, the ship which carried them for what seems to be 300 years. Green is a hostile, lush world with a sprawling decadent city, over-run with the vampiric inhum. Blue is a cold and desolate watery world whose indigenous

inhabitants, the eight limbed “Vanished People,” are only seen in strange and fleeting encounters, having moved to some other place with their powers over time and space.

I became interested in the life cycles of the two species, and soon noticed that strange imagery surrounded the trees on those two planets; it even seemed that these trees might be identified with the legendary “Vanished Gods” revered by the “Vanished People.” In one Eucharist scene, the protagonist Patera Silk makes an offering in the forest; he fears turning around during this ritual lest he see “them” watching him. Logically, the one thing that must be in a forest is trees, though there is little other indication of who could be watching. The final imagery of the story, involving the death of Silk’s wife Hyacinth, invokes the hyacinth of myth, a flower which sprung from the blood of slain Hyacinthus. The Eucharist, too, involves the transformation of wine, made from vegetable matter, into blood in the Catholic tradition. Given the discussion of vegetable hybridization in the first chapter of the series, I knew that these two features in conjunction were enough to explain the alien nature of the Vanished People and also some of the strange descriptions which hinted that the trees could eat one another – the Vanished People, and all life on Blue and Green save the inhumis, were hybrids, a process which involves instant speciation. The strange astral travel which the main character could undergo between Urth and Blue was, I understood (despite all the narrative redirection), a journey through time rather than space, and the narrative was actually set in the future of Urth after the flood had wiped it clean. However, scouring the text for clues about how a seemingly different amount of time could have passed on Urth and the Whorl, I could not determine a mechanism that would allow for Blue to actually *be* Urth, as a form of astral travel in the text allows Silk, in conjunction with a female inhumis, to visit different locales in their shared dream. According to the surface text, Blue and Urth seemed to be two separate places existing at the same time. When I wrote

Wolfe about my elaborate theory of time-travel and hybridization in a Christmas card featuring an old man with a staff (which I decorated with a small face) and a Christmas tree (in which I concealed a pair of teeth and sinister eyes), the response in his own Christmas card was corrective. He noted, “I like the spruce and the staff, *too*,” confirming my suspicions about the trees in the work¹³. However, he corrected me in a way which I instantly saw was the truth, as the first time the protagonist Silk appeared on Urth, he had been thinking of showing his companions Green before its corruption, far in the past, before the coming of the inhumani. Wolfe wrote, “No, no, NO!! Green is Urth!” Sadly, this would be the last true confirmation or correction from Wolfe I was to receive.

I had been involved in posting on the only venue at the time for Wolfe discussion online, the *Urth Mailing List*. Intending to get Wolfe’s permission to share (or not), I only indicated to the list that he had told me *something*. The editor and critic Nick Gevers¹⁴, based in Africa, contacted me in a personal email, offering to exchange some information. As a young and naïve man, I agreed. His information was that Wolfe was not going to write any more volumes in the series, and his response to my own information was initially laughter and dismissal, certain that Wolfe was only pulling my leg. At that point, he wrote Wolfe to verify that he had indeed told me such a thing. With that plot feature out in the open, I watched all of the *Urth Mailing List* seek to discredit that Green was Urth, even resulting in an organized interview held by the

¹³ Only later would I find the textual evidence of hybridization associated with the story of Spring Wind in *The Book of the New Sun*, written in the early 1980s. The reception to my ideas of cannibal trees eating flesh and producing hybrids was overwhelmingly negative before unearthing this bit of evidence, which precisely aligned with the scheme I had proposed. I initially arrived at the conclusion by taking the transubstantiation in the Eucharist literally, as Catholics do.

¹⁴ Obviously the same individual quoted throughout this dissertation.

religious scholar James Jordan, Nick Gevers, and the well-known Wolfe critic Michael Andre-Druissi, which attempted to corner Wolfe into acknowledging the setting of his story:

JJ: ...I might as well at least *ask* one of the \$64,000 questions, so I'll just go for broke.

(Hmm. I've gotta [sic] be very precise here. Okay, here goes:) Which of the following, if any, are physically (not in some merely literary or symbolic sense) the same planets as Blue and Green, in the same order?:

Ushas and Lune

Urth and Lune

Lune and Ushas

Lune and Urth

Two Urths

Two Ushases

Two Lunes

GW: None. (Andre-Druissi, et al)

This interview still comes up whenever the thought of Green or Blue being Urth arises, but Wolfe is so very cagey that this interview still represents the truth, for a closer look at *The Book of the Short Sun* confirms that Blue was not Lune, but a “red” herring in the form of Mars, known as Verthandi in *The Book of the New Sun*. While I offered this suggestion in 2002, it was not until 2015 that I was able to establish textual and metaphorical evidence from *The Book of the New Sun* of plant and human hybridization in a chapter featuring the impregnation of Early Summer (Juno) by a tree to engender Spring Wind (Mars, as per Ovid). Wolfe had planned this destiny for the home of humanity since the early 1980s, though the sequel did not employ this science-fictional adaptation of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* until almost twenty years later:

On a mountaintop beyond the shores of Urth there once lived a lovely woman named Early Summer. She was the queen of that land, but her king was a strong, unforgiving man, and because she was jealous of him he was jealous of her in turn, and killed any man he believed to be her lover.

One day Early Summer was walking in her garden when she saw a most beautiful blossom of a kind wholly new to her. It was redder than any rose and more sweetly perfumed, but its strong stalk was thornless and smooth as ivory. She plucked it and carried it to a secluded spot, and as she reclined there contemplating it, it grew to seem to her no blossom at all but such a lover as she had longed for, powerful and yet as tender as a kiss. Certain of the juices of the plant entered her and she conceived. She told the king, however, that the child was his, and since she was well guarded, he believed her.

It was a boy, and by his mother's wish he was called Spring Wind. (Wolfe, *Sword and Citadel* 102)

Despite the clear evidence of hybridity and its linkage to both the myth of Mars' conception and the planet itself, beyond the shores of Urth, many continued to react hostilely to the idea that Green might be Urth, with the corrupt city of the Inhumis featured in the text actually the ruins of the great city of Nessus of *The Book of the New Sun*. The sheer aggressive response to this reading of the Solar Cycle (which argues over issues of setting, something Wolfe clearly understands as an objective feature of the plot), might be encapsulated in this *Urth Mailing List* post from Roy C. Lackey, acidic even after years of debate:

It isn't going to make any difference; I know because I've been through this before, but I have to say something before I just get disgusted and leave the List, which is probably what I should do anyway. Facts are facts, regardless of who likes them or doesn't. There

seem to be some people left who put more stock in the text than fanciful interpretations that belie it or distort it beyond reason. Maybe this will interest those people.

There has been a lot of crap bandied about of late that I don't have the time or interest to get involved with, but one issue, the notion that the City of the Inhumis is actually Nessus, really bugs me. It just isn't so, and no amount of wishing will make it so. Silkhorn wrote down the story he told at dinner at Inclito's house about Horn's encounter with the Neighbor on Green who wanted him to clear the sewer. He wrote:

"The buildings of that city were not built by the inhumis themselves, for the inhumis do not like tools or use them skillfully. Its builders were the Vanished People, the same master builders who began this gracious house of yours." (IGJ, 60) And to anticipate the argument that Silkhorn doesn't know where he is or Horn was, there is the testimony of the same Neighbor. After walking through the ruins of the city that is crumbling under the onslaught of the encroaching jungle, the Neighbor said:

"How we deceived ourselves!" the man of the Vanished People who had been his guide said. "We thought we were building here for the ages. Another thousand years, and everything you see will be gone." (63)

Even if Silkhorn had his head up his ass, I don't see how anyone could believe that the Neighbors didn't know who they were, where they came from, or what they themselves had built. And to suggest that the Neighbor just lied is not credible. There are other details that unimaginative asshole like me notice that indicate that the City on Green is not Nessus. The black sword that Horn was given came from a selection of swords inside a "bronze tablet" (23) that was located in a ruined building. There was a black sheath that

came with it, and a sword belt with many thin straps (24) that "had never been intended for such a body as his (61). That is, not a human body.

Soon after Horn and the Neighbor entered the sewer they came to "an altar of bronze and stone" (64). Behind it was an image too worn for Horn to make out what it looked like. The Neighbor told him, "This was our goddess of purity". That is, it was a Neighbor shrine for a Neighbor goddess. Horn prayed to it and was rewarded with the little light that he used in the sewer.

There is no doubt about it; the ruined City on Green was built by the Neighbors, for the Neighbors and used by the Neighbors before they abandoned it. If this is another "asinine" reading by me of the simple textual facts, so be it.

Gerry [another frequent Urth List poster], you seem to have gotten all over you a lot of crap that really has more to do with me than you, as you have probably figured out by now. Sorry about that, but I'm not flinging it. (Lackey)

Of course, the city was built by the Neighbors, also known as the Vanished People, who, though they arose on Blue/Mars, built the city of Nessus before the hybridization event occurred beyond the shores of Urth, when they were purely human. The goddess of purity, unrecognizable, is actually the Virgin Mary. The kind of chronic aggression this post typifies did not escape Wolfe's attention.

In 2004, he published the two volumes of an epic fantasy series known as *The Wizard Knight*, already discussed at length in Chapter Three. When I reached the final chapter of the concluding volume, I was satisfied to see the role he had given to a character known as Sir Marc, instantly recognizing that he was talking about the disagreement of interpretation mentioned above:

Although Arnthor's force was to assemble out of sight of the river, I thought it prudent to station sentries along the bank, particularly at the fords, in case the enemy tried to cross; Sir Marc had charge of these. He was inspecting his men when a captain of the Osterlings shouted some insult. Rather than letting it pass in silence, Marc returned one of his own. The captain waded into the river, challenging Marc to meet him. Marc did ... and the fighting spread. (Wolfe, *Wizard* 469-470)

This roman-a-clef slice fictionalizes the critical struggle over his work, translated into the start of a final climactic battle in the very next novel he wrote. (Luckily, my namesake is firmly embedded on the side of the righteous against the cannibalistic Osterlings.) In Chapter Six, I shall present several symbolic *mise-en-abyme* embedded narratives in *The Book of the Short Sun* which allegorize the events in the solar system and explain the actions of Typhon in launching the whorl as something like an ark to preserve the old strains of humanity from the coming flood. Even though these narratives and their overall plot implications are exceedingly clear once the allegorical significance is perceived, failing to draw the parallels between the greater narrative and the embedded and camouflaged themes and plot lines gives Wolfe's fiction the appearance of an openness and ambiguity that is inaccurate. This is a feature of erasing the careful scaffolding that Wolfe employed in writing his fiction, leaving the unified and cohesively engineered edifice to seem to be a haphazard collection of *bricolage*, fragmented and irresolvable.

Chapter Five: No Man Is an Island, Entire of Itself

Having established that Gene Wolfe is an artist interested in archetypal and religious structures as well as narrative puzzles, it is now necessary to consider his relationship to tradition more thoroughly. One of Northrop Frye's central claims involves the idea that a text immediately becomes part of a literary and historical tradition composed of other texts and structures, whether its creator was consciously aware of those pre-existing elements or not. Intertextuality and allusiveness are key components of Wolfe's work. This study must consider the relationship between texts, which can be every bit as complex and informative as looking at the creation of meaning through the binary juxtaposition which informs both structural and post-structural linguistic formulations. According to Julia Kristeva, many of the hallmarks of structural textual analysis find their origins in Russian Formalism. She was especially interested in the contributions of Mikhail Bakhtin, whom she describes as:

[O]ne of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure. What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is his conception of the 'literary word' as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning) as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context. (35-6)

One of the assumptions that shall be discussed further in Chapter Six involves Wolfe's allegorical use of language. These kinds of linguistic values are generated through repetition within the text itself, but the present chapter is primarily concerned with the relationship between his fiction and older works.

While this analysis of Wolfe is not necessarily invested in Bakhtin's assertions on a word

by word level, it is worth understanding that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*.” (37) In this act, the word on an individual level serves as a mediator between structural models and environment (which could include history), also regulating between diachrony and synchrony, which Kristeva identifies as literary structure.¹⁵ The final goal of literary semiotics is in establishing other formal relationships operating within the space of the text and its constituent parts. However, both Bakhtin and Kristeva assert that much of this exteriorizing of language is unconscious in nature. In this, archetypal critics such as Northrop Frye would certainly agree with them. However, our discussion of Wolfe’s use of extratextual detail likens it more to a palpable scaffolding which the engineer has erased, joining the seemingly random elements of the text into a cohesive whole quite consciously as a design element. Both indirect and direct narration are of course possible, but given the careful structure of Wolfe’s work, I argue that both are ultimately objective in nature once the indirect narrative modes are fully understood.

Most importantly, Bakhtin makes a distinction between the manner in which discourse works in the polyphonic novels which emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century and the interior or “unreadable” polyphony of modernism. Herein lies the difficulty of discussing Wolfe: determining the genre of any of his works and its particular cosmological conventions is often far more difficult than it at first appears to be. Some of his stories are definitely mimetic realism, while others harken back to much older models, with some, such as “Peritonitis” or “Queen,”

¹⁵ Levi-Strauss’ structural analysis of myth also dealt with the concept of understanding stories through their linear syntagmatic relationship (diachrony shows a movement through time as the meaning of words change) and their paradigmatic substitutions (which would here correspond more closely to synchrony).

achieving allegorical status.

While *The Book of the New Sun* builds an allusive web around many existing historical and religious details and the Latro books, as we have examined, thrive off of a clever syncretism of traditions and myths from the ancient world, some of Wolfe's other fiction is not as obvious in its intertextuality. One of Wolfe's hallmarks, use of the supposedly unreliable narrator, suggests that the problems presented by subjective perspective, language, and even incomplete comprehension and self-identification are at times an obstacle to recognizing or approaching truth, if it exists at all. As this dissertation has attempted to make manifest, many readers of Wolfe assume that true closure remains impossible in his fiction. However, Wolfe's complex love of tradition often informs his structural design decisions. This chapter will examine the intertextual puzzles that Wolfe often develops, and there are many excellent examples of extratextual information transforming the understanding of a particular plot detail in his fiction.

Just as the first true example of Wolfe's analysis in this dissertation involved his first serious short story as a precursor to many of the themes which are repeated in his later fiction, another early example of his art, a short story called "The Changeling," also published in Damon Knight's *Orbit* anthology, befuddled readers for over forty years. In personal conversation with Science Fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson at the 2013 Nebula Award Ceremony (at which he won best novel and Wolfe was named Grandmaster), Mr. Robinson informed me that Damon Knight loved the story but was always confounded by it. Even in short stories such as "The Changeling," perspicacious readers might still be left asking themselves, "What just happened?"

In attempting to answer this plot-level question, one or two more biographical details might help. Wolfe, born in 1931, is a Catholic engineer who designed the machine which makes Pringles potato chips. He was drafted into the Korean War. Since he writes in the science fiction

and fantasy “genres,” one of the first priorities I engage in as a reader involves establishing what type of story I am reading. This difficulty rarely comes up in mimetic nineteenth-century realism: a comedy of manners is usually quite distinct from a gothic novel, and the rules governing possible events in the continuity of the surface story, despite some nebulous areas, are quite clear. A wailing banshee in the midst of *Pride and Prejudice* would simply be caddish and uncouth, but it might very well complement the mood of *Wuthering Heights*. Similarly, “The Changeling,” published in 1968, seems to be a story featuring something supernatural, but it is still set in a relatively contemporary Midwestern United States after the end of the Korean War (internal evidence suggests that the events occur in about 1965).

In “The Changeling,” a narrator whose name will not be revealed until the end of the story returns to his hometown after a long absence, during which he joined the military, fought in Korea, was taken captive, seemed to defect, changed his mind yet again, and was imprisoned in Leavenworth before finally returning to his childhood home. Almost immediately, he encounters a boy he remembers from his childhood; however, the boy remains completely unchanged and still seems to be approximately 10 years old. The other childhood friends he speaks to seem unaware that the boy has not changed, remembering some events quite differently than the narrator does, attributing the actions of the changeless boy in those memories to his normally aging brother and sister instead. The ageless boy, Peter Palmieri, becomes a focal point for the primary mystery of the text.

One key recollection brings to light the difference in perception between the narrator and his boyhood friends. The narrator remembers getting in a fight with Peter Palmieri over the right to throw a stone-bound frog into the water, sadistically. In the narrator’s memory, when Peter tries to stop him from abusing the frog, they wrestle. The narrator’s friend Ernie Cotha

remembers it rather as a fight with Palmieri's older sister, Maria, with Peter completely absent. When the narrator speaks with the Palmieri family, who owns an Italian restaurant and a hotel, he learns that the boy's father is the only other person aware of Peter's changeless nature. Papa Palmieri claims that Peter simply appeared one day when Maria was a child, and no one else notices that he doesn't age; nevertheless, he is a very good boy. Finally, the narrator, increasingly agitated, attempts to find his own fourth-grade yearbook picture at the local Catholic school of the Immaculate Conception. When the narrator's name is eventually revealed to be Pete Palmer and his place in the yearbook picture is found to be occupied by an image of the ageless child, only then do readers consider that the true mystery involves the first-person narrator as well as (or, possibly, instead of) the changeless boy.

The obvious resonance of a child named Peter who never grows up, featuring a bizarre island immune to the passage of time, certainly points to the well-known tale of Peter Pan, but the actual specifics of the plot demand a deeper look. Readers are presented with several incompatible scenarios that highlight the subjective perceptions of Pete Palmer. Upon returning to Cassonsville, the narrator directly challenges the reliability of memory when he claims that his capture and subsequent desertion during the Korean War were described differently by some of his fellow American service members. While he is overseas, his father dies. Palmer claims:

[My father] was the last family I had, and things changed for me then. There isn't much use in making a long story of what happened afterward; you can read it all in the court-martial proceedings. . . . I was one of the ones who stayed behind in China . . . I was also one of the ones who had to stand trial; let's say that some of the men who had been in the prison camp with me remembered things differently. You don't have to like it. (Wolfe, "The Changeling" 192)

The text begins to unravel¹⁶ when readers actually pay attention to the chronology of the story. In the disconcerting climax, Pete Palmer fails to find his fourth-grade picture, taken the year before he moved away from Cassonsville, the same year that North and South Korea split (which occurred at the end of World War II, in 1945). Assuming he was not held back, this would situate his birthdate near 1934. Later, Palmer claims that he was in the military and received word of his father's illness before North Korea invaded South Korea (which occurred in 1950). "I was in the army, serving in Korea, when my father died. That was before the North invaded, and I was supposed to be helping a captain teach demolition to the ROK soldiers" (192). This implies that by the end of 1949, he was already in the military, at the tender age of fifteen. Previous readers of "The Changeling" who noticed this strange break in the chronology either attributed it to an error on Wolfe's part (even though Wolfe, born in 1931, actually fought in Korea) or to an "early" admission lie told by the narrator to enter military service (which would not have been unheard of, though the three years of maturity between fifteen and eighteen are usually significant.)

In Wolfe, these breaks in the narrative can justify rampant speculation, and sometimes this speculation is not bound by strict logic. The "official" consensus of criticism which dealt with "The Changeling" asserted that the text employed a metaphor suggested by the split of South and North Korea: damaged by the war and his lost family, with mother and father dead, Pete Palmer psychically creates a boy from his mind, with an innate goodness and a complete family undamaged by change. This would make the genre of the story a kind of psychological fantasy, where thoughts and dreams are given a kind of flesh. Other readings involved the

¹⁶ Or seems to – I don't like using "seems" in academic writing, but sometimes you need it in discussing complex fiction.

Palmieri family and its hotel as a metaphor for the Catholic Church before and after Vatican II and were far more explicitly theological in their explorations. Unfortunately, neither of these approaches can explain the gap of three years in the narrative and the narrator's absence from the school picture. Logically, however, a person old enough to be in the military in 1949 might not be in a fourth-grade picture in 1944. In this manner, two mysteries might help to explain each other.

For the sake of presenting how wide-ranging the discussions surrounding one of Wolfe's stories can be, I am including several other points of view, which highlight the universal confusion in creating a coherent narrative. The editor who originally published "The Changeling," Damon Knight, was an important and respected member of the science fiction community. He greatly influenced Wolfe's early career, and the most prestigious lifetime award in the field, SFWA's Grand-Master designation, is actually named the Damon Knight Memorial Award. Most available discussion of Gene Wolfe has centered around the *Urth Mailing List*, established in 1996 and amassing thousands of pages of exegesis. One participant there, Ron Crown, notes:

[W]hen Damon Knight reprinted "Changeling" in a best-of Orbit collection from the first ten volumes; he prefaced it with a letter to Wolfe written when he bought the story in which he confesses that he "can't sort it out into any one consistent, linear, daylight-logic pattern." According to Knight, Wolfe revealed the secret years later when he whispered to him "The old man is dead, you know."

Wolfe rarely reveals any secrets, and that bit of information goes further towards explaining the otherwise unrelated novel *Peace*, also set in Cassonsville, than it does in explaining "The Changeling." Beyond the reading of the story as an update of the Peter Pan story, primarily

espoused by Michael Andre-Driussi, “Mantis” on the *Urth Mailing List*, the two most influential readings of the text are an explicitly religious one, posited by the Protestant Reverend James Jordan (“Nutria” on the list), and another reading that insists the work is actually a narrative of psychological “fracturing,” which became the dominant analytical approach to the story, taken up in published sources by Peter Wright, Joan Gordon, and others. This position is restated by Robert Pirkola of the *Urth Mailing List*, which also emphasizes something of a historical approach to the story:

I think that the difficulty in interpreting "The Changeling" is the fact that it is fractured through at least three (perhaps more) interpretive prisms. Each forms a layer that is necessary for the whole but insufficient on its own, creating together a rich thematic warp and woof that builds and reinforces itself in interesting ways.

First, you have the real-world interpretation that revolves around the 20 or so P.O.W.s from the Korean War that were captured by the Chinese, held in prison camps and brainwashed for three years. After this torturous ordeal, and being "convinced" by the Maoists, many decided to refuse repatriation and remain in China. Those that stayed went about setting up new lives in the People's Republic. Pete Palmer is one of these individuals. He mentions Panmunjom, the Korean town where talks were held that ultimately resulted in the release of the POWs on June 8, 1953. [...]

When Pete Palmer finally decides to return to America, c. 1959, he is held prisoner by the U.S., undergoing detention and a trial at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. Several of the real-life prisoners, Otho Bell, William Cowart, and Lewis Griggs faced trial but in 1955. (See *The Graybeards*, Official Publication of the Korean War Veterans Association, Vol. 15, No. 4, July-August 2002, pp. 10-11). In this real-world interpretation, several of the mysterious

happenings that occur in the story (the unaging Peter Palmieri, the lack of records, his going crazy) can be viewed as the understandable psychological response of a person who has been through a rather hellish experience only to return "home" and find that because of the choices made after undergoing intense indoctrination at a very young age (probably about 17 when he was captured) he has been consciously forgotten by everyone. Rather than believe that one of their own would be a "red" sympathizer, they have chosen instead to act as though he doesn't exist. Ernie Cotha and Papa Palmieri being examples of ones who have remembered and presumably forgiven Pete his "sins" [sic]. (Pirkola)

James Jordan takes a far more theological approach to the story, but his Protestant obsession with faith over good-works involves creating a symbolic discussion which might not fit very well into the explicitly Catholic framework often visible in Wolfe's work. In addition, his claim below that ten years of age is the age of confirmation is slightly incorrect as concerns Catholic doctrine: in practice, it is usually done at the approach of adulthood in the teenage years, but in theory should be undertaken at the age of discretion, generally considered to be seven years of age. His original post and approach are preserved here:

It looks a whole lot like the Italian family is a code for the Church. (Compare the Italian Restaurant in *There Are Doors*.) Mama is the Church, and the infallible Papa is Jesus or God, companion of wandering friars and also of the down-&-out; and because he/He is dead (has died) he can perceive things others can't The kids are Maria (Mary), Peter, and Paul, leaders of the Church in that order.

Now, a class picture was taken at Immaculate Conception School in the fourth grade. Why? I submit that this is because that's when the sacrament of Holy Confirmation is

given to kids. And if I'm right, this may be a key.

Suppose at that point, a True Spiritual Peter (Palmieri) is split off from the old Peter Palmer. Peter Palmer recalls another Peter Palmieri, but no one else does. He recalls fighting him. In the fight, Palmer was the cruel kid, and Palmieri was his good half.

Palmer attacks Maria and kills a frog; Palmieri defends both. When Palmer moves away, and goes bad in Korea, Palmieri remains behind, always a spiritual child who has never grown up.

Let's put it another way: Peter Palmer was confirmed, but was spiritually stillborn. He did not accept the gift of the Spirit. His new "self" thus remained in the Church with Mama and Papa and Maria and Paul, but never grew up. Meanwhile, Peter Palmer went his own way. (Every Christian has two halves, the old Adamic "flesh" and the new person "in Christ.")

In the photo, there is only one Peter. Palmer remembers two, but he is spiritually split, and that is why.

Meanwhile, the town does not know of Palmer's adult life. For them, he has remained a child, adopted into the Palmieri home (the Church). After a time of being an adult, and ruining his life, Palmer returns to Cassonsville. He reverts to being a child, and lives on the kids' island, like Peter Pan. His attempt to find fulfillment as an adult apart from the Church has been a failure, and he reverts to an isolated childhood that can have no fruition of any sort.

Now, suppose that Palmer accepted the Palmieri's offer, and moved into Maria's room (into Mary's house, into the Church), and became part of the society of the Palmieri (Italian; Church) home life. In that way he might start over again, beginning at the point

of his Confirmation, and become one with Peter Palmieri.

Reverend Jordan continues to ask some cogent questions, the first of which employs the “secret” of the text revealed by Gene Wolfe to Damon Knight:

1. Who is dead? Peter Palmer's father, from the beginning of the story. He was the last of Palmer's family. Is Papa dead? It would not seem so, though he is described in a way similar to Palmer's father. Rather, I suggest that just as Palmer has somehow been adopted into the Palmieri family, so his dead father is in that family also (since, being Italian, it is the Church), and his dead father's spirit may give insight to Papa.

2. The rock throwing incident. On the shore, as an adult, Palmer sees the island as near and large. Once on the island, Palmer becomes as a child again: the island becomes boy-sized, and farther from the shore. When Paul throws the rock, he sees it hit the near land; while Palmer and the other boys see it splash into the water, the shore being farther away. It would seem that both are "true."

3. Assuming all the above is valid -- and boy, I'm sure not sure at all -- maybe the permanent Peter Palmieri is the Papacy. Thus, he is unchanging, while others are born, grow, and die around him. He is with a group of boys (disciples?). On the island, he is one of three, surrounded by crosses (swords with crosspieces stuck in the ground): Peter, James, & John? And: Where is Cassonsville and the Kanakesee River? Are they near St. Louis, where the Cardinals play baseball? Notice the baseball game in the story. (Jordan, 17 Jul 1997)

Several days later, Jordan revised this, and his new claim concerning the island is far superior to his original claim, one that I think actually describes what is going on with the island from a spiritual point of view. From the shore, the island seems closer than when the narrator was

young, but on the island, the young people think that the shore left behind is closer than the narrator says it is. Death is certainly one thing that is farther when you are young and closer when you are old. Similarly, from that metaphorical island, the land of the living seems farther away to an older man, whether in terms of sin or simply years. Here are Jordan's further comments, which I feel are difficult to paraphrase without losing their evangelical flavor:

2. The title is "The Changeling," and as we know, titles mean a whole lot in Wolfe. The story is about changeable Pete, not unchanging Peter. That's gotta [sic] be important.

2a. Ernie Cotha says, "Nobody leaves Cassonsville." Well, Pete and his family did. It does seem, however, as if Cassonsville is pretty unchanging. People do grow, but things change slowly. Cotha's teeth have been fixed, but otherwise.... The convent school and the photo have aged somewhat.

2b. The island is completely unchanging: "Maybe it was because every tree and rock and bush and berry tangle was familiar and unaltered." Bushes and berry tangles unaltered? A truly timeless place. More later.

[...]

4. The unchanging island is the grave. That's why there are crosses there. That's why Peter says that nobody can throw a rock to the farther shore, the living world. That's why the island is closer to the shore in the eyes of the older Pete, who is nearer to death than he was when a child. The hermit's cave at the end equals a tomb.

5. If Peter doesn't change at all, Sister Leona "hadn't changed much; nuns don't."

6. May I make a bold move, for the sake of discussion? Peter is Pan, but also Christ. Unchanging. He is linked into the Italian Family (Church), with Papa (Pope), Mama (Church), Maria (Mary), and Paul. Only Papa (Pope) and Pete notice Peter as such, Papa

because he is the vicar of Christ, and Pete because... he's supposed to replace Papa as new Pope? Nuns don't change much because they also represent the Unchanging Christ.

Cassonsville changes a bit more rapidly, but yet much more slowly than Pete has, as a result of leaving Cassonsville.

7. "Nobody leaves Cassonsville." Well, Pete left, and disappeared. He's not in the school picture, and not in the written records (the Bible? The Book of Life of the Lamb?). If someone leaves Cassonsville, he becomes "nobody," non-existent in terms of Cassonsville.

8. "Peter still has the same last name as always and I guess now he always will." Why? Because Pete was supposed to grow up, marry Maria, and Peter would move into his house? Mama wanted Pete to stay in Maria's room, but he wouldn't.

9. Now I'm building quite a bit, but let me make another bold move. Papa is the Pope. Paul, the younger, cocky child is Protestantism. Paul insists he can throw a rock from the eternal to the temporal (the Rock is Christ?), but he can't, because he's not the Pope. Sure, he's a member of the family, but not completely playing by the rules.

Pete is supposed to be the new Pope, but he has apostatized. He is, in that sense, a changeling. He chucks his true name and becomes a commie [sic] (shades of liberation theology!), but even when he returns, he won't take up with Maria and make a home for Peter (Christ).

My guess is that this story is, in part, Wolfe's conservative catholic take on the present state of the Roman Catholic Church, at least at the time it was written (1968). At that time, Wolfe was probably more right-wing than he is now (and in terms of mainstream American thinking, he's pretty right-wing now).

Note that Peter Palmer is just American for Peter Palmieri. So, the old Italian (earlier) Catholic church was holding on, keeping Peter (Jesus) around in a home, but the American Catholics don't make a home for Peter. They change their name and become commies (liberation theology). So, Peter has to stay in an Italian family, increasingly marginalized at the edge of town.

Peter's last name is still Palmieri at the end, the Italian (Catholic) name, but the boys who are with him (Him) don't call him by it much. Protestant Paul has more influence with them. Too bad Pete refused his calling. (Too bad from Wolfe's point of view; as a Calvinist I have my own....)

As with many Wolfe readers, Jordan is left forcing some associations that might not be fully endorsed by the text; however, Mama Palmieri's belief that Papa is "infallible," coupled with the names Peter, Paul, and Maria, make the religious connotations of the story hard to ignore.

Dedicated researchers can find pages and pages of exegesis on this short story, and most of the discussion concerns the idea of fragmentation and separation. Indeed, there seems little effort to claim that the genre of the story is actually fantastic in nature, given an ageless child, instead branding its plot events as psychological or spiritual metaphors for the narrator's internal condition. Clearly, however, there is a subjectivity to the narrative voice that mystifies readers.

The pivotal scene that invokes the subjective nature of memory involves the differing accounts of the frog conflict, which occurred shortly before the narrator left Cassonsville: his friend Ernie Cotha remembers the narrator wrestling with Maria Palmieri, but the narrator instead recalls fighting with the ageless boy Peter, and seems to be the only one besides Papa Palmieri who can recognize that the boy is changeless. Papa Palmieri reveals something which previous critics ignore: the young boy appears when his daughter Maria, three years older than

Pete Palmer believes himself to be, was still a newborn, and inhabits a fully furnished room at his appearance. Even family from overseas write letters inquiring about the newly appeared child, either indicating that the magic surrounding him is potent indeed, or that something else is going on. When we consider the age gap of three years between a fifteen-year old in the military and the possible age at which Peter Palmer could legally enlist at eighteen, we should also note that Maria is thirteen-years old while the other children in the wrestling scene were only ten. Here, then, is the narrative gap of three years, appearing in two places. Can the repetition of a three-year age gap be employed to help understand the story?

There seem to be two likely interpretive scenarios that delve beyond the text to create a narrative that makes sense. The first and most common reading, as already mentioned, involves a psychological fragmentation in which there was only one family, and the Palmieris in Cassonsville are somehow maintained by the powerful wish-fulfillment fantasy of our narrator Pete Palmer. The second logical narrative possibility, which no one had previously explored when I started looking at the story in 2012, involves an actual eldritch and fay changeling swap at birth in 1931, which would imply that there are two different families. This set up would not require that the “mirrored” family (actually not mirrored at all) have any true cognate for Peter, Paul, Maria, and Mama Palmieri in the family structure of Pete Palmer. In this scenario, when Pete and Peter wrestle in 1944, the close proximity with his elfin changeling distorts the narrator’s perceptions, and he only believes himself to be in the fourth-grade because of the subsequent effect that touch had on his memories. In this reading, with a changeling swap enacted in 1931, Pete Palmer would actually be in the seventh-grade picture and old enough to be in the military in 1949. That makes the short story an explicit fantasy, featuring a genuine elfin changeling (as the title would suggest immediately), and indicates that our narrator has been

stolen from his true family, the Palmieris, who have forgotten him thanks to the distorting nature of the young boy. His own memories were only affected during the direct physical contact with his changeling.

The internal validation for this later scenario comes from Wolfe's use of the Catholic idea of the Immaculate Conception, the name of the school the narrator attended. Most people outside of the Catholic Church, and some within it, do not realize that this has nothing to do with the conception of Christ. This actually involves the conception of Mary, born without original sin so that she could be a worthy vessel for Christ. In Wolfe's narrative, the "spiritual" Peter Palmieri also appears with Maria. Certain that this was the correct reading, with two distinct families present in the text, I still wanted further confirmation. In order to determine if anyone else had previously presented this scenario, which would explain why the narrator was not in the fourth-grade yearbook picture (he did not, alas, have the self-awareness to check the seventh-grade pictures) and how he could legally be in the military in 1949, I entered "Pete Palmer born in 1931" into an internet search. To my surprise, a real actor came up: Peter Palmer, most famous for the live action role of Li'l Abner, was born in 1931. Much like Jethro from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Li'l Abner is characterized as a big oaf. This was all the confirmation I needed. From World Wide Words, the definition of "oaf" reads:

An oaf is a stupid, boorish, or clumsy man.

There's an intimate connection between oafs and elves. In ancient legend, elves weren't the noble creatures portrayed in Tolkien's stories but powerful and dangerous supernatural beings who were more likely to harm humans than to help them. Their name says so: it comes from an ancient Germanic term for a nightmare, a close relative of the first element of the modern German *Alldruck* with the same sense. Among other nasty

habits, elves were thought to bring humans bad dreams and to steal their children, leaving changelings in their place.

It's from that belief that *oaf* first appeared in English, in the seventeenth century.

Originally an oaf was an elf's child, one that had been left in a poor exchange for a stolen human one. In popular superstition, such children were assumed to be ugly or stupid.

(Quinion)

Of course, in this case, the mortal man is a boorish villain and the spiritual boy is pure, but the story's title resonates with the actor Peter Palmer's playing of an oaf in real life: "The Changeling" was actually about a changeling, and following the internal narrative logic led to external historical references which are objective in nature. Peter Palmer's name in its extratextual sense is inextricably tied to the word oaf; the word oaf implies an elfin changeling. The literal narrative incorporation of the idea of the Immaculate Conception should have been enough to indicate that the mystery of the story actually involves the birth of Maria rather than some event which occurred after 1931. While there is not a compelling reason to speculate on the thematic implications of the inversion of good and bad in the story (though we are reminded of another famous "changeling" left for a human child in the care of a carpenter and his wife), the issue here involves the highly engineered precision of the workings of this story: we can know that Pete Palmer was born in 1931 – because Peter Palmer, the real-world actor, like Gene Wolfe, was born in 1931. We know that the changeling scenario is the proper reading, even though the narrator does not, because of the story's connection to external facts which are obliquely and indirectly alluded to without actually being stated – the history of the word oaf, innately tied to the character Pete Palmer is most famous for playing, bears the connotation of an elfin changeling within it. Finally, we know that the transcendent, universal meaning of the Catholic

concept of the Immaculate Conception, by its very definition, involves a mystery associated with Mary/Maria, not with Christ, and the fay child appeared when Maria was still a newborn.

No one had recognized these highly engineered underpinnings of the story. In *Attending Daedalus*, a book length study on Gene Wolfe, Peter Wright asserts that this story recontextualizes “the Peter Pan myth of the eternal child, [and...] demonstrates how memory can construct a therapeutic fantasy world into which psychologically scarred individuals can withdraw to find a kind of mental security ... Palmer revives his past self and the world of his childhood to find an otherwise unattainable freedom” (30). Alas, the genre and the title of the story actually suggest a more fantastic plot: a changeling swap in which all of that psychological analysis fails to confront “what happened.” In its way, the consensus reading has almost no textual basis – it is a (reasonable) extrapolation based on the similarity between the names Pete Palmer and Peter Palimieri.

When I presented my reading of “The Changeling” to Wolfe in 2012 via email, while he neither confirmed nor denied it, he did say a few things which might be of interest:

There's a special mass tonight for Holy Thursday; I'm planning to go to that. Also a Good Friday service tomorrow. Then mass on Sunday, of course. After mass, Bobby and I will drive down to Teri's for Easter dinner.

I've always liked Li'l Abner. Not Fearless Fosdick or any other such stuff, but the real thing: Abner, Mammy (Pansy Yokum), Pappy (Lucifer Yokum), Daisy Mae (Scragg), Moonbeam (McSwine), Stupifyin' Jones, Ol' Man Mose, Nightmare Alice, Hairless Joe, Lonesome Polecat, Eddie Ricketyback, Earthquake McGoon, and, well, on and on. The cast was huge, and always full of interest. (Wolfe, Personal Correspondence)

Even if the intent of the author has always supposedly been hidden behind a screen of

inscrutable and impenetrable “textuality,” Wolfe’s Catholicism and his knowledge of Li’l Abner are both on display in this private message. This was all the confirmation I needed that I had reached the solution to his puzzle (after all, Li’l Abner appears nowhere by name in the story itself, yet Wolfe undoubtedly bears a childhood fondness for the character). Even without the external evidence, the application of the Catholic mystery operates strongly enough in Wolfe’s fiction to help draw conclusions – that is simply the modality Wolfe employs in constructing his stories, and, at least from his point of view, those sacraments and mysteries are not subjective in nature, but are instead codified and made objective by creed. Whether we believe they are transcendent truths or not, they are theologically and historically verifiable and definable. This, then, becomes the basis for understanding much of Wolfe’s fiction. Unlike Adam Roberts claim, quoted at the start of this dissertation, in which the symbols evident in Wolfe’s fiction lead to further confusion, the literal application of sacraments and creeds to the fiction of Gene Wolfe actually provides narrative closure: Roberts simply doesn’t recognize the meaning of the especially Catholic traditions Wolfe employs.

The entire thrust of this analysis is the assertion that Wolfe writes as an engineer: his mysteries are resolvable as long as the audience knows that the historical and religious significations function as objective signs. While the act of reading obviously involves the uncertainty of the linguistic enterprise, the manner in which Wolfe’s texts are constructed, based on externally verifiable “facts” outside of the linguistic system, even if they are rooted in convention, creates some interesting questions about the actual subjectivity (or possibility) of a mimetic model. This comes down to the process of composition: Wolfe creates palimpsests that truly are elaborate word problems based on logic, allusion, and pattern.

I now return to some statements made by De Man and Derrida, with which I opened this

dissertation. The model of reading presented in approaching Wolfe, with Catholic ideas and traditions given a concrete plot function as allusions which buttress and illuminate the suspicions aroused through a close reading, is not universal, but rather an individual process which acknowledges the rigorous process Wolfe undertakes in constructing his literary word problems. De Man states, "The replacement of a hermeneutic by a semiotic model, of interpretation by decoding, would represent, in view of the baffling historical instability of textual meanings (including, of course, those of canonical texts) a considerable progress. ... The argument can be made, however, that no grammatical decoding, however refined, could claim to reach the determining figural dimensions of a text" (De Man 15). I do not think this is an accurate assessment of the rigorous logic of Wolfe's texts; readers must at times go beyond grammar to historical and objective details that aid in the approximation of the transcendent signifier (in this case, established through a pre-existing creed). Would De Man identify this process as a rhetorical reading? By couching much of the solution in actualizing pre-existing standards of belief, the parameters at work in Wolfe's stories have objective components. De Man also says:

Technically correct rhetorical readings may be boring, monotonous, predictable and unpleasant, but they are irrefutable. They are also totalizing (and potentially totalitarian) for since the structures and functions they expose do not lead to the knowledge of an entity (such as language) but are an unreliable process of knowledge production that prevents all entities, including linguistic entities, from coming into discourse as such, they are indeed universals, consistently defective models of language's impossibility to be a model language. (15)

For many readers constantly baffled by Wolfe's stories, his fiction actually reinforces these ideas about the impossible nature of language. One of his most enigmatic novellas, "Seven American

Nights,” features several narrative destabilizers, including the possibility of the narrator ingesting hallucinogenic drugs, a machine which can write in the style of any sample fed to it, and his conceivably altered journal, recovered after he has disappeared. Peter Wright describes this work as follows:

In ‘Seven American Nights’, which chronicles the adventures of a young Iranian tourist, Nadan Jaffarzadeh, in a post-catastrophic USA, Wolfe’s appeal to the reader’s ‘capacity for ironic judgement’ is explicit. On his arrival in the USA Jaffarzadeh buys what he believes to be a hallucinogenic drug in which he soaks one of six candy eggs, resolving to eat one sweet on each of the remaining nights of his stay. Recorded as a first-person narrative, the story abounds with uncertainties as the reader, like Jaffarzadeh, is unsure when, or if, the drug is effective. As a consequence, the veracity of all Jaffarzadeh’s experiences after he ingests the first egg becomes suspect. Which of his many strange encounters are hallucinations? ... These questions cannot be answered as the authenticity of the events recounted in Jaffarzadeh’s notebook remain in doubt. ... By emphasizing early in the narrative that the mysteries of the story cannot be resolved, Wolfe indicates that the text is an insoluble self-referential puzzle about the conundrum of perception rather than an enigma for the reader to solve by detection. (Wright, *Attending Daedalus* 38-9)

I cannot resist the sublime pleasure of stating, one final time, that Wright is wrong. The events of the novella occur during Holy Week, before Easter, and much like Christ, the narrator will face a similar trial on Thursday off-screen: the strange steps the narrator hears outside his door at the end of his Thursday entry are readily understandable to someone who realizes the allegorical situation: Jaffarzadeh has been arrested and will be executed on Friday, when the writing

machine finishes his journal. External validation of this comes from a surprising source: every Persian character save one in the novella is named after characters in another obscure book by James Morier published in 1823, *The Adventures of Haji Baba of Ispahan*. In that book, Nadan is a secondary and insignificant character whose dialogue includes one very specific line which confirms our suspicions – he boasts that from Friday to Friday, no drink or unclean substance shall touch his lips. In Wolfe’s “Seven American Nights,” Nadan refuses a drink on an early day, citing religious reasons; however, on the final day, the narrator drinks without qualm or refusal. The seven nights of the title span Friday to Friday. Readers need not be confused by the possibility that Nadan may have ingested a hallucinogenic drug on any given day: his namesake in *The Adventures of Haji Baba of Ispahan* actually boasts that nothing of the sort shall touch his lips. Far from an insoluble puzzle, two simple allusions straighten out all of the confusion: Nadan is arrested and put to death by the American government, reliving the events of Holy Week, and the final Friday entry is a fabrication, in which he drinks alcohol and violates the boast of the character from whom Wolfe took his name, cluing us in to that entry’s artificiality.¹⁷ In Morier’s novel, the character Nadan boasts as follows:

‘In that,’ said the mollah, ‘esteem yourself as the most fortunate of men; for I am looked up to as the pattern of the followers of the blessed Mahomed. In short, I may be called a living Koran. None pray more regularly than I. No one goes to the bath more scrupulously, nor abstains more rigidly from everything that is counted unclean. You will find neither silk in my dress, nor gold on my fingers. My ablutions are esteemed the most complete of any man’s in the capital, and the mode of my abstension the most in use. I

¹⁷ Earlier in the text, Nadan returns home to find his desk ransacked and one of the eggs missing: police dogs have removed the “hallucinogen,” which was probably poisoned regardless, though we do not have the time or space to indulge in all of these complex details.

neither smoke nor drink wine before men; neither do I play at chess, at *gengifeh* (cards), or any game which, as the law ordains, abstracts the mind from holy meditation. I am esteemed the model of fasters; and during the Ramazan give no quarter to the many hungry fellows who come to me under various pretexts, to beg a remission of the strictness of the law. “No,” do say to them, “die rather than eat, or drink, or smoke. Do like me, who, rather than abate one tittle of the sacred ordinance, would manage to exist from *Jumah* to *Jumah* (Friday) without polluting my lips with unlawful food.”

The story of “Seven American Nights” happens to span from *Jumah* to *Jumah*, and every character with a Persian or Arabic name save Gholam Gassem in Wolfe’s novella might be found in Morier’s novel as well. In addition, an understanding of the religious scruples (even if they do become at times hypocritical) which govern Nadan’s use of alcohol and his adamant refusal earlier in the novella serves as a fairly large beacon that something is not quite right on the final day of his journal when he suggests an alcoholic drink carelessly: religion is important in Wolfe’s stories. Paying attention to religious creeds and scruples can be useful in cutting through the other barriers to comprehension.

Given that a thorough understanding of Wolfe’s texts on a surface level (even to answer “what happened”) demands a historical and theological connection, his engineered order creates scenarios which are seemingly incomprehensible when they are removed from their objective structures. When Derrida considers that “reading should free itself, at least in its axis, from the classical categories of history—not only from the categories of the history of ideas and the history of literature but also, and perhaps above all, from the categories of the history of philosophy,” perhaps too much of what is accepted as objective would be lost to contextualize a Wolfe story, leaving language a closed system where its subjective and slippery nature is far

more obvious (Derrida 3). It might be worth relating Wolfe and his use of transcendent, universal signs established by creed and historical or literary events to Derrida's theories on signs and the

Logos:

As modern structural thought has clearly realized, language is a system of signs and linguistics is part and parcel of the science of signs, or *semiotics* (Saussure's *sémiologie*). The mediaeval definition of *sign*—"aliquid stat pro aliquo"—has been resurrected and put forward as still valid and productive. Thus the constitutive mark of any sign in general and of any linguistic sign in particular is its twofold character: every linguistic unit is bipartite and involves both aspects—one sensible and the other intelligible... But to these metaphysico-theological roots many other hidden sediments cling. The semiological or, more specifically, linguistic "science" cannot therefore hold on to the difference between signifier and signified—the very idea of the sign—without the difference between sensible and intelligible; certainly, but also not without retaining, more profoundly and more implicitly, and by the same token the reference to a signified able to "take place" in its intelligibility, before its "fall," before any expulsion into the exteriority of the sensible here below. As the face of pure intelligibility, it refers to an absolute logos to which it is immediately united. This absolute logos was an infinite creative subjectivity in medieval theology: the intelligible face of the sign remains turned toward the word and the face of God.

Of course, it is not a question of "rejecting" these notions; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them. It is a question at first of demonstrating the systematic and historical solidarity of the concepts and gestures of thought that one often believes can be innocently separated. The sign and divinity have

the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never *end*. Its historical *closure is*, however, outlined.

Even when the thing, the “referent,” is not immediately related to the logos of a creator God where it began by being the spoken/thought sense, the signified has at any rate an immediate relationship with the logos in general (finite or infinite), and a mediated one with the signifier, that is to say with the exteriority of writing (Derrida 14-15).

That wonderful interplay between writing and representation, sign and signified, and interior and exterior might very well be *bricolage*, but from the point of view of an engineer, if external events are reproducible in any way, they approach a kind of truth. It could very well be that the close reading I have found so effective in making Wolfe’s texts “sensible” and “intelligible,” assuming all along that the intentions of the creator where actually determinable, might be but a coincidental trick of language’s ability to convince us that it refers to anything at all as an adequate model. That understanding might also be a delusion that Gene Wolfe and I share – enough to convince us that one man’s random and haphazard *bricolage* is another man’s precise and ordered engineering.

The final text this chapter will employ to illustrate how profoundly Wolfe’s fiction is connected to an existing tradition is from much later in his writing career. *The Sorcerer’s House* was published in 2010 and remains one of his more popular late works. Certainly, Wolfe has produced a lot of dense masterpieces. His later fiction can be just as complex as the earlier work which skyrocketed him to, if not fame, a reputation as one of the genre’s most accomplished literary artists. *The Sorcerer’s House* directly teases that definitive conclusions about “what really happened” might never be reached. In this novel, an educated con man struggling to make ends meet after his incarceration contacts his twin brother in a series of letters that serve to flatter

his brother's wife just as much as they hope to attract his twin's attention. He claims to inherit a sprawling and sinister house as well as a strip of land that will guarantee him a fortune; sorcery, multiple twins of different temperaments, shape-changing foxes, werewolves, a professional psychic, real estate agents, and his mother from fairyland all people a fast-paced plot that finally puts Baxter Dunn and his brother George face to face (maybe). The final "compiler's note" ends with the claim that "Baxter Dunn was unquestionably a most imaginative and picturesque liar, but all that he tells us cannot be false. ... How much is true? How much fabrication? Perhaps we shall never know" (Wolfe, *Sorcerer's House* 300).

An ending like that actually does cast doubt on whether readers can ever meaningfully discern the "real" events from the fabricated or exaggerated ones depicted in the epistolary web of the novel. Luckily, we have at least one powerful metaphor to help contextualize the structure of Bax's story. In the novel, the "magic" performed by Bax and some other characters seems to involve a device with three rings. While the strange symbol of the three-ringed triannulus serves to indicate how the magic in the novel works, it also seems to be, in its own way, yet another metaphor for the novel as a whole. Everything found on the inner ring is on each of the external rings, but there are extra figures that appear on each successive layer, such that some images on the second ring are not found on the first, while images graven into the external third are not present on the two more central rings. The psychic consultant who advises first George's wife and then Bax might actually provide some very cogent advice on how to read the novel:

So I talked all this over with Madame Orizia. She is my psychic adviser. I said, "Do you think George will hurt his poor brother?" She tried the cards and looked terribly frightened. After that, the little crystal. That is the real one, as she told me two years ago.

There is a big one, too. It is plastic but it looks like crystal and it tells everybody what they want to hear. She uses that one all the time.

But the little one is real. She said she saw great danger for George and his brother (you) too. BE CAREFUL. (114)

This suggests how to proceed in reading the novel: the “smaller” ring introduces truths from Bax’s real life, which are then embellished - at first, we might assume that these are according to Baxter’s increasingly large ambitions. Looking at the shorter letters written back and forth to Shell, Madame Orizia, and Doris initially supports the impression that Baxter is attempting to con his brother in many of his letters. In particular, the brief and quick notes to Sheldon Hawes, his cellmate, contain only a fraction of the details included in Bax’s other missives, and are especially telling in their failure to mention Bax’s supposed benefactor, Zwart Black, as well as the second set of twins, Zwart’s sons Ieuan and Emlyn, whom he encounters inside the Black House.

These letters also reveal the triple structure of the novel. At one point, Bax finds three coins, and pawns one of them at face value in order to try to get enough to make more money later: “I will sell one of the larger coins. It should bring a considerable sum, and with that I can redeem the smallest” (77). This act could even reflect Baxter’s aim: he might be attempting to “sell” the larger stories in the hope of material gain to redeem his actual meager existence – which is a coin sold at “face value” – the truth. However, this does not mean that the genre of the novel is a strict realistic con game, as there are just enough hints of a different type of supernatural menace in the short letters to Shell and in the missives from Madame Orizia and Doris, and sufficient threat throughout the novel to suggest that Bax might lose mastery of his plans, as he does not entirely control the parameters of the real and unreal. In one of Wolfe’s

greatest reversals, the very structure of *The Sorcerer's House* hints that house spirits are actually conning the con man.

It is worth expanding on the triple nature of Bax's story. At one point, he borrows a wheelbarrow from his neighbor to transport a recliner left on the curb to his new estate. As Bax sits in the chair, he notes, "I found fifty-five cents in the crack between the seat and the back. . . . fifty-five cents is a significant sum to me just now" (40). Perhaps the easiest way to make fifty-five cents is with two quarters and a nickel – three coins, but one of them different in kind, and smaller. Soon, he finds three gold coins inside a desk in the attic, of Greek design, and these are the coins which he intends to pawn, mentioned above. His areas of specialty and interest are the classical world of antiquity and nineteenth century literature. After this, Bax finds a mattress in the attic: "Assisted only by [the fox] Winkle, I was – barely – able to drag the mattress down the spiral stair I have described and into this room. I am seated on it now, and sit proudly" (77). Of course, he discovers ridiculous amounts of money in this mattress, just as he found money in the chair and the desk, each find increasingly unbelievable and unlikely. This triple pattern, three in one, might also shed light on the organization of the novel as a whole, and as these patterns develop, the "two to one" motif becomes more prevalent, whether it be three types of fish in the Lakeshore Hat Trick or three guests at Alexander Skotos's funeral.

TriPLICATION allows other permutations on themes, motifs, or legends within the novel. When Bax first goes out to eat with the interested real-estate agent Doris Rose Griffin, he hears a story from her about Mr. Black's old butler, who was known for stealing clothes-lines (106). Her story soon presents the potential immortality of the butler and even evolves into a suggestion that he serves the head of John the Baptist on a platter, though the disparate parts of the butler's tale seem to be cobbled together from multiple urban legends. In the next letter, a hobo shows up

squatting in Bax's house, and soon returns claiming to be the legendary butler. Still later, the "butler" Nick casts aside this identity and, almost on cue, a more vampiric iteration of the butler emerges from the locked trunk of the car in Baxter's garage. In this case, we can see how there might be three "uses" of Doris's story and the hobo: after his introduction as a story, the tale of the butler becomes real, and he begins to serve Bax. Soon, when that figure's role in the story changes, the butler is re-introduced in the form of a different character, with different details and features, and the first butler becomes Zwart Black, incognito, the man who supposedly left his house to Baxter Dunn. If we are to (mistakenly) assume that Bax is constructing different versions of his tale, such as a tame exaggeration of romantic conquests to entertain his old cell mate and a more fantastic one to attract George and Millie, then there are three iterations of the butler: as a story, as a living man who serves Bax, and as a vampire or zombie liberated from the trunk. Though this final figure seems to be a threatening one, Nicholas still calls Bax on the phone with the same verbal habits and subservient attitude as Bax's previous butler, in an act which has no previous precedent in the text; it is definitely worth noting that Orizia identifies him as the source of Bax's problems once he is sealed back in the trunk.

If Madame Orizia's statement about her larger con crystals is to be believed, then the inner ring of the triannulus is synonymous with the small crystal: "That is the real one." The large, convoluted web of fabrications resonates with the crystal that just "tells everybody what they want to hear." Unfortunately, Wolfe makes life hard for everyone by corroborating some (but not all) of the supernatural seeming events in short letters from Doris and Madame Orizia – including mention of the malevolent dwarf Quorn, the wolves which Baxter claims to have fought in his longer letters, and a strange woman he and Doris meet on the road named Kiki. After some reflection, it seems that Bax himself describes exactly what Sheldon, who might

represent the middle ring of the con game, would want: “You have been waiting for the sex, if I know you. The problem is telling you so that you will believe it” (156). For the purposes of this analysis, it might be most fruitful to consider Doris’s very brief letters as the innermost ring, though this, too, presents some challenges. Her mention of Kiki and the werewolves in the postscripts to her notes brings us to the possibility of forgery: one of Bax’s friends in prison was a forger, and it seems that at least one of the letters *must* be forged (though it is most likely Letter 44, written from “George” to Millie). Can we trust even the shortest letters in the text, those from Doris, without considering that her postscripts might be forged? The strange spectral hitchhiker Kiki and the werewolves are mentioned in Doris’s short letters, while no mention of the twin brothers Ieuan and Emlyn or their father Zwart Black make it into Bax’s letters to Sheldon Hawes at all, precluding them from the central ring of “truth.” However, it seems that an even more sinister myth lurks in the darkness of the trunk for Bax, one associated with strange eyes and a strong stench that thrives off the blood of children, originating in ancient Greece.

Wolfe’s late fiction often does two different things at once, and some of the subtext actually seems to be intended as metatextual or symbolic illustrations for the reader to begin to piece together the background story. In the case of *The Sorcerer’s House*, perhaps Madame Orizia’s and Bax’s contradictions, suggestions, and hints might point to the inconsistencies in the more fantastic version of the story. In Tim Powers introduction to the PS Publishing edition of the novel, he asserts:

The Sorcerer’s House is alive with mythology, but the ideal reader would be one who knows nothing of mythology. After all, the reason mythology still enchants us is that the oldest circuitry in our brains recognizes its eerily consistent images and figures and quandaries as transcendently *real*, not because we consider it anthropologically

educational. The subconscious is a keyboard, and the keys don't have to be named if the hearers recognize the notes. (Powers vii)

While this is a fascinating statement that almost jives with the famous quote regarding the unconscious operation of symbols present at the start of *The Book of the New Sun*, Wolfe is a conscious artist, and to be separated from mythology is to lose some very important knowledge. Why be left with uncertainty when we can actually *know*? *The Sorcerer's House* alludes to many myths, and they are deeply entrenched in untangling the reality behind Bax's experiences.

Since Quorn and Kiki appear in the short letters, it is worthwhile considering their greater implications. As readers concentrate on only the brief letters, it first appears as though a non-supernatural explanation works to explain most things. However, details in the accounts from Madame Orizia and Doris challenge this reading. Wolfe has been known to rely on external allusions to thematically ground some of the patterns in his work, and in this case, the most obvious loose thread involves the cryptic warnings of Kiki, who mentions that there is something waiting in the dark for Bax and also suggests that, at least for her, home is never far. Her name bears a close resemblance to a house spirit known as the Kikimora. This is only the first "dirty" trick of allusion Wolfe pulls in this particular text.

In its most benevolent manifestation, the Kikimora is a kitchen spirit. In many European folk traditions, however, the Kikimora serves as the bearer of bad news. According to Natalia Klimczak:

The meaning of her name may come from the Finnish language, where "kikke mörkö" means scarecrow. No matter what the roots of the word are, it is used for a being without a body, a nightmare, or a scary spirit which disturbs people at night. Kikimora is a

creature which settles in a house and doesn't want to leave - making the lives of people who live there unbearable.

Her origins are somewhat confused, but the Kikimora was often grown from a dead fetus or stillborn child, or, in some traditions, even proceeding from the body of a woman who died during childbirth. Besides serving as a messenger of bad news, the Kikimora legends involve several specific details that are worth thinking about. She could appear as a young woman who would visit men in their dreams sexually to drain their energy, and also torment the real women involved with the men to make them jealous and suspicious. The Kikimora could also travel through keyholes and, if a Kikimora was suspected to be present, children were advised to avoid looking at doors, chests, and wardrobes, where the spirits like to hide. One manner of fighting the illusions and charms of the Kikimora was by looking out of windows.

The windows in Bax's house are given a special significance that is never fully explained within the text. One of the twins, Ieuan, is insistent upon breaking the windows, and a clear explanation is never given. A midnight visitor with a cold handshake puts out the "longlight" candle which accompanies the triannulus, an ominous development which terrifies the other twin, Emlyn. Bax is even visited by a werewolf vixen in the night for sexual purposes. However, not all of the imagery associated with the Kikimora is negative, as the protective spirit could also appear as a deceased member of the family.

The Russian version of the Kikimora's tale resonates even more strongly with the events in *The Sorcerer's House*. She can dwell in the cellar or in the stove and makes sounds like those of mice. There are two distinct types of Kikimoras: one comes from the forest and is married to a creature known as a Domovoi (which means "He from the house.") The Domovoi are small,

bearded, and hairy, and they can also appear as the current house owner, or a male ancestor, sometimes with horns. They can also appear as cats or dogs. The Domovoi is the house guardian, and if he is happy, his nature is benevolent. However, if he becomes displeased due to disrespect, slovenliness, or abuse, he becomes more like a poltergeist and will even physically assault the owners. Most importantly for the purpose of analyzing Wolfe's novel, the Domovoi can serve as an oracle. His singing, joking, and dancing will predict a good future, but several warning signs foretell impending misfortune or a death in the family (usually for the head of the household). These include night wailing, the extinguishing of a candle, and the visible manifestation of the Domovoi. If his hands feel warm, good fortune is coming; a cold touch presages misfortune and doom. He also dwells beneath the threshold, at the center of the house, or under the stove. Additionally, he has a tendency to steal tools which are left out (Ivanits).

The resonance with the plot of *The Sorcerer's House* does not stop here, because the other type of Kikimora, originating from the swamp, is married to a strange and malevolent being known as Leshy, a shapeshifting forest creature who can also change size. He leads travelers astray and abducts children, but he is also accompanied by a coterie of wolves and bears. He shares features with another demon of Slavic mythology known as Chort, whose name means "the black one" (Bane). Readers who have recently completed Wolfe's novel would notice several resonances with the plot, including the forest creatures, the blowing out of a candle bringing bad luck, and even the importance of a handshake; the Kikimora serves as an excellent bridge between the "fantastic" longer letters sent to Millie and George and the short letters between Shell, Doris, and Madame Orizia; its associations can finally begin to contextualize the supernatural events surrounding Bax, though he does not realize their implications himself.

Unfortunately, the triple structure of the novel demands that readers look for more than one type of spirit, and there are some details in the novel, delineated below, which suggest that perhaps the Kikimora is not truly the “inner ring” of spirits, especially considering the horned image on the triannulus. Given that two of the characters in the text have the names Nick and Nicholas, and even seem to appear in a letter from Shell to Bax “checking up” on our primary narrator and his friends, under the guise of “the Greek” and a “long skinny torpedo,” legends surrounding Saint Nicholas, especially those of the more sinister Knecht Ruprecht, might also make sense of some of the imagery in the text. Saint Nicholas even has a companion named Zwarte Piet, also loosely associated with the demonic. Zwart Black, it should be noted, was the name of the man who supposedly left Bax his strange house.

However, even considering the mythical echoes of Knecht Ruprecht and the Kikimora, the primary threat of the text, at least as identified by Madame Orizia, does not seem to come into much greater clarity. Instead, readers are left with scant information to determine the identity of the rattling “thing” inside the trunk she identifies as the center of Bax’s troubles. Additionally, some of the background details make little sense at first. Characters such as Goldwurm and Ambrosius, sorcerers from Faerie, are equally unexplained, though they are mentioned several times by Emlyn. Given the emphasis on “the Greek” and his companion, there are just enough hints to suggest that the drinker of children’s blood with its terrible, terrible eyes (linking it to the lycanthrope Lupine, the most obvious antagonist of the text), with its unsettling and unusual hands (which directly threaten strangulation in Shell’s letter, connecting it in the text to Goldwurm, who supposedly strangled Ambrosius) might actually be at the center of Bax’s problems. A worm, after all, might be described as a long, skinny torpedo. One legend which might explain both Goldwurm and the mysterious Nicholas happens to be Greek in origin, and

the most infamous drinker of the blood of children (who happens to have eyes with very unusual properties and is also usually associated with a very strong and terrible stench) in Greek myth is the Lamia of Corinth, especially as related in Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius*. There are many reasons to suspect that the Lamia, a shapeshifter not always relegated to the form of a serpent, might represent the true threat to Bax's safety, but there is one more important detail which readers should consider. Bax's magical werewolf companion, Inari Winkle, might be more sinister than she appears.

In F. Hadland Davis's *Myths and Legends of Japan*, the fox God Inari is certainly presented in a complex light:

Inari was originally the God of Rice, but in the eleventh century he became associated with the Fox God, with attributes for good and evil, mostly for evil, so profuse and so manifold in their application that they cause no little confusion to the English reader. All foxes possess supernatural powers to an almost limitless degree. They have the power of infinite vision; they can hear everything and understand the secret thoughts of mankind generally, and in addition they possess the power of transformation and of transmutation. The chief attribute of the bad fox is the power to delude human beings, and for this purpose it will take the form of a beautiful woman, and many are the legends told in this connection. If the shadow of a fox-woman chances to fall upon water, only the fox, and not the fair woman, is revealed. It is said that if a dog sees a fox-woman the feminine form vanishes immediately, and the fox alone remains. (95)

Given the habits of the malicious Kikimora to deceive and beguile men, the features of the fox mentioned above are also manifested in Bax's letters, including the prominent presence of a dog and water. Without looking into these myths, some of the novel's features, such as the

description of Nicholas as a “torpedo,” the ambiguously gendered figure on the Corinthian coin Bax finds, and the relationship of Goldwurm and Ambrosius to the surface story would be forever unclear.

The identities and features of Nicholas, Lupine, and Goldwurm all conform to the legends surrounding the Lamia of Corinth, a unified mythos describing a sinister and completely devious figure. At one point in the text, the younger set of twins who appear in the Black House but are never seen outside of it engage in some personal conversation with Bax. Ultimately, the surface plot indicates that they are his younger siblings, while the real-estate agent who initially oversaw the property and handed it over to Bax, Martha Murrey, eventually becomes the mother of both sets of twins. When one of the twins, Ieuan, comes to warn Bax of Lupine, Bax refuses to shake his hand. His brother Emlyn seems to become infatuated with the man-eating Lupine, and by the end of the story he is clearly under her sway. Though Ieuan might not be “real” outside of Bax’s mind, his warning is topical. The Lamia of Corinth has one power in myth which solidifies her as the primary threat of the text, though her name is never directly mentioned. In addition to changing shape, having an ambiguous gender (Lamia’s testicles, according to Aristophanes, are the most noxious objects in existence), drinking the blood of humans (particularly children), having a strong stench, and possessing terrible eyes which can possess others, she has the ability to create a mansion, servants and all, to accomplish her seductions and drain the life from her victims. When Apollonius of Tyana saw through her illusion, it vanished (Ogden). Wolfe has envisioned a different end here, given the close relationship between the names Apollonius and Ambrosius. In his novel, the master sorcerer Ambrosius was strangled offstage by Goldwurm, a name which invokes the word often used to describe dragons and serpents of myth: wurm. The gold in the name also links it to the golden Corinthian coin, which has a woman on one side and

a figure of ambiguous gender on the other. In addition, the gold tipped staff of power which Zwart Black appears to wield at the climax of the novel is a clear symbolic link to the domination of the Lamia over the perceptions of everyone in that scene, through the structures and resonances established by Wolfe's repetitions.

When Bax picks up a hitchhiker name Kiki in the central chapter of the book, knowledge of the kikimora myth also help to contextualize much of that particular encounter and of events which previously seemed to be merely features of the surface plot. Her patterns of speech reinforce the structure of the novel: "Rode in a car twice. . . . Twice in a car's all I've ever rode. Uncanny thing, though ain't it? Ain't it a uncanny thing?" (Wolfe, *The Sorcerer's House* 182) Two off screen cart rides and one car ride in the text's present mirrors the pattern of three employed throughout the novel. She also keeps repeating that her house is always near, as it would be if it was a manifestation of another hostile spirit in the form of Lupine/Nicholas/the Lamia of Corinth. Kiki warns Bax that something is waiting in the dark behind them in the car – later, readers discover that Nicholas the vampiric butler has been hiding inside "his" trunk, stowed in the back of the car.

Ultimately, Wolfe saturates the text with intertextual mythological references so thoroughly that even seemingly innocuous descriptions help identify characters. He comes into the Black House through Martha Murrey. She invites him to her own house and prepares food for him. During her meal preparation, she claims that when she returned from a long trip, she was left as nothing but a scarecrow. Normally, this would be an innocuous description. However, given that the name kikimora means "scarecrow," describing a house spirit of the kitchen, this innocuous statement implicates her in the web of spirits seeking to snare Bax. Those who know the myth of the kikimora become privy to the supernatural agencies at work in the text and the

manner in which Bax is deceived into believing that the house, his supposed inheritance, is “real.”

Without the very clear triple pattern suggested by the triannulus, of two exaggerated or artificial occurrences and one natural one, there would be very little room to assert anything with confidence in this novel. The text encourages careful readers to begin collapsing identities into one another, given how Alexander Skotos, Zwart Black, and Nick (the first butler, before Nicholas emerges from his trunk), despite contrary stories and inconsistent details, all merge into one figure. To believe that Nick is Zwart Black, after all, requires readers to assume that he is lying about being a creature made by Black. Similarly, to believe that Alexander Skotos is Zwart Black requires readers to ignore that Skotos’ friend Hardaway does not recognize Black at the funeral.

It is worth reiterating one final time how the novel has been structured around the stories of the Lamia. Nicholas exists in old newspapers reports set forty years before the novel begins as a threat to children, stealing clothes and drinking their blood. When the trunk is opened, everyone comments on the stench. When Lupine appears, she is also associated with a strong smell. One common trope of the Lamia in myth involves the stench that allows her detection. The Lamia was long used as a story to frighten the young, and her backstory is profoundly related to children: her own children, born of Zeus, were destroyed by a jealous Hera. In some versions of the myth, she tore her own eyes out in madness, and Zeus gave her a new pair, transforming her into a monster who could exact revenge by consuming the children of others, in some stories drinking their blood. Of course, these are the traits which most exemplify Nicholas: terrifying eyes, along with the strange stench surrounding the butler and Lupine herself. In later stories of the Lamia, such as the one told by Philostratus in his biography of Apollonius, a first

century wonder worker, a ghost has assumed the guise of a woman to seduce one of his students. Apollonius warns his pupil that he is warming a snake at his bosom. This creature admits to fattening up her young male victims for food, interested in their fresh blood. Finally, and most tellingly for the novel, this apparition, the Lamia of Corinth, has the ability to summon an entire mansion, servants and all. Only when Apollonius reveals her false identity is the illusion dispelled (Ogden). This also explains the disappearance of Bax in the “Compiler’s Note” at the end of the novel: he, too, will fall victim to the Lamia’s machinations, though her name is never mentioned in the text itself. The house he has been living in is nothing but the illusion of the Lamia, and the servants merely extensions of her own plan.

Hopefully readers will be able to see how intimately the story of the Lamia resonates with the trouble Bax faces in *The Sorcerer’s House*. Goldwurm and Ambrosius are most easily understood in thinking of them as the Lamia and Apollonius; the golden Corinthian coin allegorizes the Lamia and creates a connection to the image of gold, which influences George so strongly when he chases Nicholas into the Black House. The description of Nick, with his odd hands, as a “long skinny torpedo” might be considered serpentine in nature. In some myths of the Lamia, she has monstrous hands as well. Additionally, she is not always a serpent and can change into other forms.

The allegorical possibilities in the text should perhaps also be considered in closing. The name Ambrosius means “immortal” or “divine,” originating from a Greek adjective. Bax’s thwarted love interest, Doris, has a name which means “gift,” just as her husband Theodore has a name which means “gift of God.” While some readings of the book assert that Doris is a danger to Bax, the modus operandi of a jealous Kikimora to make true lovers doubt each other seems to explain the suspicion cast on her and her own flight from Bax, which she repents of too late. It

seems that the spirit of Ted Griffin actually does act to facilitate the relationship of Bax and Doris Rose, and to protect Bax when he can as a being far less powerful than the others at work in the text. Ieuan has a name which also means “God is gracious” or gift – Bax has the chance to interact with three gifts in the form of Ieuan, Ted, and Doris, and his final rejection of Dorris’ ring and his acceptance of the sword at the end of the novel suggests that he has chosen a weapon over love, throwing away all of them when he destroys his brother and takes his place, embracing the illusions and empty promises of the Lamia, dooming himself.

In each of the texts discussed in this chapter, knowledge outside of the text serves as confirmation of suspicions which arise from the structure of the texts themselves. The next chapter will deal more thoroughly with the complicated design elements discernible in Wolfe’s fiction and present at its conclusion a cogent reading strategy which suggests that some features of the texts normally considered subjective might be viewed in a far more rigorous and objective fashion.

Chapter Six: Not for Everyone

This chapter will focus on a very particular feature of Wolfe's writing, one which is difficult to ignore once it is seen, though it can be arduous to establish the connections it relies upon in the first place. This involves his use of actual narrative allegory. While in general this could imply any kind of symbolic representation, for the purposes of this chapter, allegory is characterized by its one-to-one relationship between a character or image and what it represents. At its most basic form, this allows Christian in a narrative such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to be a character and an everyman who embodies the struggles of every Christian. Wolfe's use of the form is far more sophisticated, but the allegorical set pieces he employs are features which provide plot closure to his work. In the first chapter, we briefly introduced Nick Gevers' speculation on the uncertainty of knowledge in Wolfe's texts through his treatment of a collection of three interlinked novellas, under the umbrella title *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972). However, an understanding of the narrative allegory suffusing the text can eliminate much of that uncertainty.

Peace (1975) and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* are Wolfe's two major works of the 1970s, the ones which thrust him to prominence before the public and critical success of *The Book of the New Sun* in the first half of the 1980s. While both would seem to be more open than traditional genre novels of the time period, they are often lumped into the New Wave of science fiction, in which the prose, style, and theme of science fiction novels began to incorporate many of the innovations of mainstream Modernism, including a skepticism of technology and progress which had been largely absent throughout the Campbell and Hugo dominated Golden Age of Science Fiction. Oddly, both *Peace* and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* seem to have reached a critical consensus that, in a vacuum, would elude first time or hasty readers. Obviously, there is no

certain correlation between an author's intent and consensus, especially when analyzing a Gene Wolfe text. However, it is worth talking about these dominant interpretations, for one of these conclusions is almost certainly correct and the other the literary equivalent of swallowing bait: a solution which does not account for the allegorical closure which Wolfe embeds in the central novella of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. The science fictional *Fifth Head of Cerberus* represents a very complex use of the *mise en abyme* technique in its central novella to represent the biological life cycles of the alien species featured in the novel, and this understanding dispels much of the murky confusion surrounding the story.

Initially, the *mise en abyme* was a technique employed in painting, placing a copy of an image inside itself. While there are several ancient examples of its use throughout literary history, such as the story of Cupid and Psyche's marriage planted in the middle of Apuleius' *Golden Ass* amidst other wedding woe, Andre Gide, who began his writing career associated with the symbolist movement, brought it back to the attention of literary criticism in the 1970s:

The expression "mise en abyme" might well have remained an obscure *terminus technicus* of the heralds, had not André Gide, himself a keen student of heraldry, used it to describe a form of self-reflexive embedding found in various art-forms. As Gide explained in his journal; "In a work of art I rather like to find transposed, on the scale of the characters, the very subject of that work. Thus in paintings by Memling or Quentin Metzys, a small dark convex mirror reflects the interior of the room in which the action of the painting takes place. Likewise in Velázquez's painting of the *Meniñas* ... in the play scene in *Hamlet* and in many other plays. None of these is altogether exact. What would explain better what I'd wanted to do in my *Cahiers*, in *Narcise* and in *La*

Tentative, would be a comparison with the device from heraldry that involves putting a second representation of the original shield “en abyme” within it”.

Gide’s use of this term “mise en abyme” was picked up by Magny in his history of the French novel and it gradually became part of the analytical lexicon of literary scholars, particular after the publication in 1977 of Lucien Dällenbach’s book *Le récit spéculaire*, which was the first comprehensive attempt at exploring the poetics of *mise en abyme*.

(Whatling)

The central novella of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, though it reads as a mythical “history” of the shapeshifting aboriginal inhabitants of one of the twin planets later (supposedly) colonized by French and English space travelers, actually functions within the framework of all three novellas as an allegorical and symbolic *mise en abyme*. However, it is easier to see Wolfe’s particularly allegorical use of this technique in the embedded stories of his next novel, *Peace*.

While on a first reading *Peace* seems the rather quiet memories of a retired and ill midwestern plant worker and later manager, it is commonly understood to have far more sinister narrative depths. General consensus is that Alden Dennis Weer, its narrator, is actually dead, and that his spirit wanders the corridors of mutable memories as he turns away from harsh realities, which include several accidental deaths, for some of which he bears responsibility. The novel contains a series of embedded stories, most of which feature ghosts. In parallel, they provide some of the narrative closure that seems to be missing in the surface text. There is no definitive textual statement that Weer is dead, as he never comes to that realization throughout the first-person narrative. The fact is concealed through several key metaphorical connections. The first lines of the novel read, “The elm tree planted by Eleanor Bold, the judge’s daughter, fell last night. I was asleep and heard nothing, but from the number of shattered limbs and the size of the

turn there must have been a terrible crashing” (Wolfe, *Peace* 9). Over two hundred pages later, the metonymic connection between trees and death is forged when Weer discusses a call with another office visitor: “Mrs. Porter? You heard her – she wants to plant a tree on my grave when I’m gone. That’s her hobby: she plants trees of endangered American species on the graves of her friends” (250). The historical existence of Dutch Elm disease, along with other personal features shared by Eleanor Bold and Mrs. Porter, such as golden hair and a fleeting association with a boy named Porter, suggest that Eleanor in fact married Porter and took his name; however, this terminal inference is actually solidified by the ghost stories which punctuate the text.

Given how reluctant the reading public was to accept other narrative closures concerning Wolfe’s later work such as *The Book of the Short Sun*, I found the free acceptance of Weer’s death to be somewhat disconcerting. The idea that the novel *Peace* is actually a ghost story is readily embraced despite the lack of clear narrative statement; I was not subsequently surprised to discover that Wolfe had been uncharacteristically forthright about Weer’s status in interviews. Rather than allow an open interpretation, Wolfe freely admitted to the nature of his main character in *Peace* through multiple outlets:

JJ: In *Peace*, is Weer in Purgatory working toward peace?

GW: Yeah, I think probably he is.

JJ: Is that something you thought about when you wrote it?

GW: That is not the way I conceived it when I wrote it. I conceived it more that he was a ghost trying to make sense of his own life. And I think that is another way of saying that. Goodness knows we don’t know much about Heaven and we know even less about Hell and we hardly know anything about Purgatory at all. What is it? And if you believe in

ghosts – and I happen to believe in ghosts – what’s going on with them? Long, long ago, one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries said that hell is not a place; it is a state: Where I am, hell is. (Jordan, “Gene Wolfe Interview” 116-7)

In another interview, Wolfe also spells this out textually:

RF: Peace seems to be told by a *sidhe*, mentioned in the last pages of the book. As if some immortal creature lives by constantly reliving. What exactly is going on with Alden Weer?

GW: Weer is dead. In spirit, he is reliving his life, which he confuses with the house he built during his final years. Note that at the end of the book Miss Bold asks permission to plant a tree on his grave. It is the fall of that tree, at the beginning of the book, that has freed his ghost – an old superstition. (Frazier, “The Legerdemain of the Wolfe” 49)

The logical conclusion to draw concerning the consensus that Weer is dead simply flows from the fact that Wolfe has said he is: his intention, in this particular case, is believed without question, though it is almost impossible to make this connection on a first reading. In Frazier’s interview, Wolfe identifies “Miss Bold” as the one asking about planting a tree, though in the text she is only named as Mrs. Porter, a distraction that would be easily overlooked without extreme foresight. Since the success of *Peace* and *The Book of the New Sun*, Wolfe has become increasingly reluctant to discuss his narrative tricks.

However, Weer’s death is not the only mystery in *Peace*, and it is here that readers can begin to see Wolfe’s use of the embedded story to provide direct narrative closure. Alden Weer, the son of John Weer, spends great portions of his childhood with his Aunt Olivia. Much of the drama of the novel involves her potential suitors, and, eventually, she is run down in cold blood in the street. One of the embedded fairy stories Weer reads is presented in the text immediately

following a meeting between his aunt and one of her would-be boyfriends, Jim McAfee. As can be expected, the story is highly metaphorical:

At night the princess lived all alone in her seagirt tower.

This was (of course) the result of a prophecy made at the queen's bedside by a certain bent and crooked and hairy wizard who had come hobbling up out of the night just when the rejoicings were loudest. This wizard, who dressed in wolf-skins and was said to live exclusively upon tea, had chanted:

“The little maiden you toast here

Shall live alone full many a year;

And many a wight shall seek her hand,

Though she not own a foot of land;

Earth, sea, and air

Will woo the fair,

But fire will win her.

And though her sire be a king by birth

Greater, the groom will gin gold from the earth.”

Naturally the king, though he would have liked to have a wealthy son-in-law, did not care for the sound of the word “greater,” and thus the tower on the rock. This cloistered girl's fame spread far and wide, as was no doubt inevitable; and doubtless it occurred to a good many people that although there was no way of really knowing what was meant by “fire” in the rhyme – after the wedding it could doubtless be explained in a good many ways – it seemed quite clear that whoever won her would be a king (or better) and very rich.

However, there was no place to anchor a ship within miles of the rock, and nearly

everyone who tried to pay court to the unfortunate princess (whose name was Elaia) drowned. (Wolfe, *Peace* 80-81)

Elaia is the Greek word for olive – clearly, this story is about Weer’s Aunt Olivia’s courtship. The description of the suitors also reveals something about their motives. The gnome prince of the earth who tries to earn her trust is turned away because “his kisses had tasted too strongly of fresh-turned earth” (82). A college teacher at a nearby university, Professor Peacock, takes Olivia spelunking with him before they have a falling out, and he clearly corresponds to this gnome prince. The man she eventually marries, Julius Smart, starts a successful orange juice factory. In a process which only makes sense alchemically, the primary ingredient of his orange juice is potatoes – in this way he “gin[s] gold from the earth.”

Another embedded story scarcely commented upon is more akin to the *Thousand and One Nights* in its structure. In it, the Marid Naranj gains a slave, Ben Yahya, who is delivered directly to the lands of the dead after his long service is done. *Naranjo* is the Spanish word for orange, and Ben Yahya means “son of John” – Weer’s father’s name was John, and Weer worked many years for the man who became his uncle in his orange juice factory. These stories create an allegorical correlation between the external plot and the metaphorical events relayed through them. This is a hallmark of how Wolfe provides narrative closure: the fate of Ben Yahya directly informs the fate of Alden Dennis Weer, the son of John. While the existing criticism on *Peace* dwelt strongly on the Eleanor Bold/Mrs. Porter connection, no one seems to have noted the correlation between Naranj and the orange magnate Julius Smart. There are several embedded stories in *Peace*; they all contribute to a greater understanding of the surface text and are sometimes the only manner in which certain plot lines are resolved, but they are predicated

upon accurately mapping the external details to the corresponding features within each smaller narrative. Wolfe adapts this technique in far less obvious ways in his other fiction.

Turning back to *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, Peter Wright, Robert Borski, and the *Alzabo Soup* podcast all endorse a very particular reading of that sequence of novellas, while Nick Gevers emphasizes the ultimate indeterminacy of self-knowledge and conclusions in such an ambiguous system. In brief, on the colony planet of Ste. Croix, the narrator, called Number Five, grows up in a bizarre environment with his brother David under the tutelage of the “simulated” intelligence of their “great-grandfather,” M. Million. He is subjected to the strange experiments of their father, known only as *Maitre*, who is prominent in the community as a scientist and brothel keeper. By the end of the first novella, it becomes clear that Number Five is part of a clone lineage which includes his father and grandfather, originated by the personality which suffered death to be translated into the machine tutor M. Million. Since that original, each successive clone (with a sibling outcrossing such as David) establishes the same pattern in an attempt to understand why they have not advanced further in Ste. Croix’s society, before killing their father and assuming his role in turn. While this plot is presented in a convoluted fashion, the true mystery of the novel involves the original inhabitants of a neighboring planet, Ste. Anne. Supposedly, shape changing aboriginals once dwelt there, possibly exterminated by the French colonists. However, the possibility exists that the aborigines (usually called Abos in the text) were more successful in their mimicry than was originally apparent, and that they have actually supplanted all human life on both planets. The mouthpiece of this theory is Number Five’s aunt, operating under the assumed name Aubrey Veil.

The central novella, “A Story by John V. Marsch,” which I argue is an extended metaphorical *mise en abyme*, tells the story of a pair of aboriginal twins separated at birth on Ste.

Anne. The protagonist, Sandwalker, is raised with his mother's tribe, who call themselves the Hill People. As Sandwalker travels the world, he encounters the mysterious, phantasmagorical Shadow children and eventually faces his brother Eastwind, who has been raised amongst the zealous Marshmen of Ste. Anne. After a Shadow Child bites Eastwind, one brother kills the other by sweeping his legs out from under him. The survivor believes himself to be Sandwalker. In the third novella, "V.R.T.," the "human" Dr. Marsch is arrested by the government on Ste. Croix after his anthropological studies on Ste. Anne, where he was guided by a young local boy named Victor Trenchard. However, at a certain point, Marsch seems to have developed difficulty writing and firing his weapon; the shapeshifting aboriginals, who might or might not be extinct in the surface story, were notoriously bad with tools, and some of his memories would seem to indicate that he is in fact the boy Victor from Ste. Anne.

Nick Gevers emphasizes the absolute indeterminacy of making conclusions about Marsch's actual nature. His assessment of the middle novella is as follows:

The reader's assumption of Marsch's scholarly and sympathetic creation of a possible myth-tale of an exterminated race – distant from any original, genuine narrative – has strong implications. The 'Story' is fiction in this light - appealing, with elements of *truth*, but pure speculation. It says much about Marsch and the paradigms of his profession, but is a mere codification of fragments of lore and archaeological gossip. The narrative is unreliable, however studied and scientific its structure and conclusions may be. In the context of this reading, Wolfe is simply implying yet again the limitation of knowledge. But when the reader has perused the third novella, 'V.R.T.', another reading - or several - is suggested. Marsch may be an aborigine posing as an anthropologist, in which case the 'Story' is correct in its details, or at least close to truth. Perhaps much genuine insight into

the aborigines is attainable by means of a re-reading of the text. The evidence of artificial or second-hand composition alters, becoming natural, suitable to oral folklore being set down for the first time. Unfortunately, Wolfe is never so obliging to his readers. It remains in doubt whether Marsch is human or aboriginal, and this complicates the text into unresolvable ambiguity. No deductions from the 'Story' are certainly valid. In this manner, by means of a devious narrative ploy, Wolfe suggests the existential and cognitive confusion of his characters. The text in which they are embedded allows no definition, of the world or the self. (133-4)

While the verbiage of uncertainty is never far from discussions of Gene Wolfe and his work, most critics are firmer in asserting that Marsch has in fact been replaced by the boy Victor R. Trenchard, claiming that this is the source of the title for the third novella (“V.R.T.”), whose narration primarily features Marsch. While much of this dissertation has focused on objective elements of plot and extrapolating solutions from a narrative data set without a particular critical approach to reception in mind, other critics have often drawn conclusions from the text and applied their solutions to very specific critical paradigms. For example, Peter Wright has written a postcolonial analysis of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* based on the assumption that Marsch is in fact a shape changing aboriginal. Robert Borski also suggests that this narrative twist is an objective feature of the text in his review on *Ultan's Library*:

Taking place on the sister worlds of Sainte Anne and Sainte Croix, *Fifth Head* consists of three semi-linked novellas—besides the opening piece, there is the oddly-titled “‘A Story,’ by John V. Marsch” and the closing “V.R.T.” Characters met in the first novella reappear in the third, while the fictional constructs encountered in the second—an extended faux fable about what life might have been like for the native Annese (or abos) before their

world becomes colonised [sic] by the space-faring French—have real-life counterparts in the pieces that bookend it. This interrelatedness, in fact, epitomises [sic] much of *Fifth Head*'s unique structure; it's tripartite to be sure, but holistically so, being, as the book's various narrative, tonal and thematic skeins wind in and out and back amongst themselves, recursive to the *n*th degree, like a specular Moebius strip. And if this isn't challenging enough, while the story-telling thrust in the first two novellas is relatively straight-forward, "V.R.T" is told anachronically, with the reader left to piece everything together from a fragmentary, disjointed narrative, with at least one startling paradigm shift not everyone catches on his or her first time through. (Borski, "The Fifth Head of Cerberus Reviewed")

Peter Wright's take on the events in "V.R.T." conjoins with this suggested twist: his article takes for granted that the anthropologist Marsch was replaced by his guide somewhere along the way; the shapechanging boy decided to live out his dreams and escape his rural background, only to be incarcerated and possibly executed or forgotten in the Kafkaesque nightmare of Ste. Croix's Port Mimizon.

Wright goes all in on a postcolonial reading of the text. Initially, he acknowledges the ambiguity of the surface story:

Since its publication in 1972, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, Gene Wolfe's collection of three inter-linked novellas, has earned a reputation for being the author's most perplexing single volume. Such a reputation is entirely justified since ambiguity is the watchword to the text. More significantly, it is also an organising [sic] principle of form, a means of confounding interpretation, and a fundamental theme associated with Wolfe's defining authorial obsessions: the subjectivity of perception, the unreliability of memory, and the

nature of identity. To draw attention to the presence of equivocation in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* is hardly original as every critic and reviewer to approach the text has cited its influence as a source of their own puzzlement, their sense of inadequacy and, at times, their despair. 'Hints, hints, damnable hints and clues! That's all there is in Gene Wolfe's stories: little pieces of the jigsaw and one is never quite sure that there is a pattern to the jigsaw', declares Bruce Gillespie, making no attempt to disguise his exasperation at his subject's abstruseness. However, few critics have recognised [sic] that the introduction of ambiguity in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* has a political purpose engaged directly with colonial and postcolonial situations and concerns.

Joan Gordon, for example, observes how the three novellas deploy 'science fiction models, such as aliens and clones, to explore thematic issues of identity and humanity, and it uses ambiguity and lack of resolution to express the complexity of those ambiguous and unresolvable themes.' She sees Wolfe's treatment of his subject matter as largely philosophical rather than political, exploring 'questions raised by abstract and universal problems.' Unfortunately, by approaching the novellas in this way, she fails to apprehend that the themes she identifies, 'humanity and humaneness, identity, and memory', are explored in a postcolonial setting through key postcolonial concepts, including mimicry, hybridity and binarism.

(Wright, "Confounding the Skin and the Mask")

Wolfe truly is invested in a postcolonial effort in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*; more generally, once a group of people have internalized colonial values from an external source, the resulting hybridity is genuinely difficult to separate into component parts. In any such system, both colonized and colonizer are affected. Wright goes on to acknowledge:

The ambiguity characterising [sic] *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* is associated with one major theme: the nature of identity. Although the focus of the novellas is individual identity: what is the nature of a clone in ‘The Fifth Head of Cerberus’; how can identical twins – natural clones – distinguish themselves in ‘’A Story’’ by John V. Marsch’; and how can John V. Marsch/Victor Trenchard prove his identity and purpose to the authorities on Sainte Croix in ‘V.R.T.’, there is a more essential question underpinning the narratives: who is human? This question arises as a consequence of the uncertain fate of the Annese aborigines, who may have been shape-changers capable, as Veil’s Hypothesis suggests, of imitating, both physically and psychologically, the original French colonists, whom they killed and replaced, without even remembering their actions. Through this possibility, Wolfe draws attention to the likely psychological and cultural outcomes of contact between white human colonists and an aboriginal people, through the metaphor of the amnesiac shapeshifter, an individual capable of forgetting its own near-perfect mimicry.

The concept of mimicry is essential to postcolonial theory. The term is used to describe the ambivalent relationship between coloniser [sic] and colonised [sic]. It occurs when colonial discourse and ideology encourages the colonised [sic] subject to adopt the coloniser’s [sic] cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, resulting in a copy – often blurred – of the coloniser’s [sic] traits. Since it is science fiction, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* has the capacity to address the consequences of mimicry more starkly than mimetic or realist fiction.

Above, Wright acknowledges the possibility that Victor Trenchard might be the ‘Marsch’ arrested in Port Mimizon, and he continues to paint a picture of the terrible power imbalances

and bureaucratic abuse of the colonizers. However, Wright's critique of humanity goes well beyond the text:

Wolfe develops his condemnation of mimicry through Veil's Hypothesis which, in the text, is ironically discredited by the 'veiled' woman – Aunt Jeannine – who proposed it. She suggests that it arose as a result of Veil's desire to find 'a dramatic explanation for the cruelty and irrationality he sees around him.' However, there is irony here, too, since, if the aborigines imitated humans, then the cruelty they (re-)enact in the place of the human is human cruelty. Nowhere is this more apparent than in "A Story" by John V. Marsch', where aborigine-mimics – Eastwind's people – sacrifice members of Sandwalker's tribe, who are themselves mimicking humans. Whatever way the reader considers Aunt Jeannine's rebuttal of Veil's theory, he or she must concede that Wolfe is drawing attention both to human 'cruelty and irrationality' and to the corruption of an alien culture compelled by human interference and their power of mimicry to re-enact it. Significantly, postcolonial theorists have seen mimicry as bordering on mockery, 'since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. Mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour [sic] of the colonised [sic].' This is precisely what the shapeshifters of Sainte Anne effect: a mockery of white, Western colonial authority, which can be imitated, replicated and perpetuated by a pre-Dendritic culture any coloniser would term primitive in its full pejorative sense. Here, Wright inexplicably claims that the natives on Ste. Croix participating in sacrifice and bloodshed amongst each other are imitating humans, but no humans have yet touched down on the planet. There is no such mimicry to blame for their behavior. In addition, Wright has latched onto a term used to describe the aboriginals, predendritic, which is employed in the text by

Marsch to describe aboriginal culture but has no true anthropological meaning. A dendrite merely branches out like a tree, and, though he is unaware of it, Wright has unwittingly latched onto one method of identifying the aboriginals, which shall be expanded upon below. All of these claims of the irreconcilable mystery and ambiguity of the text don't spend much time looking at actual patterns which emerge from the text.

Even though *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* is an explicitly science fictional novel, the approach to its mysteries generally lack scientific rigor. The collection of novellas directly indicates that the aboriginals are not very good with their hands, but the text repeatedly points towards another identifying feature. While readers are busy looking for signs of characters with poorly functioning hands, they miss the fact that Port Mimizon, the city in which Number Five grows up (with a French-sounding name very close to mimicry) is structured around fingers and a thumb. Indeed, its official district is called the *departement de la main*, or the Department of the Hand. Furthermore, the women in Number Five's father's brothel all have very suspicious looking legs. Indeed, all the women in the text do:

Two of my father's demimondaines were waiting in the hall, costumed and painted until they seemed more alien than any abos, stately as Lombardy poplars and inhuman as specters. ... One of the girls giggled; they were seated on the divan now, their long, gleaming legs crossed before them like the varnished staffs of flags." (Wolfe, *Fifth Head of Cerberus* 32-3)

This odd, thin leg imagery is repeated many times, and here it is even conjoined to the tree imagery of Lombardy poplars. When Number Five first meets his Aunt Jeanine, who goes by the name Aubrey Veil in her professional life, she has crippled and useless legs, having some prosthetic device which allows her to float. She is described later as follows: "[Aunt Jeanine's]

black skirt, lying emptily against the leg boards of the chair like a collapsed tenet, showed legs no thicker than my wrists, but also an odd thickening, almost like a saddle, below her hips” (52).

Later, when Number Five meets Phaedria, a local girl who embroils him and his brother into a life of petty crime and acting, she is introduced with a leg injury: “Toward noon I was joined, not on my own bench, but on another close enough for there to be a feeling of proximity, by a dark-haired girl with one ankle in a cast” (37). Another of the girls is also described in a very particular fashion: “I have thought since, many times, of that girl as I saw her leaving: the high-heeled platform shoes and grotesquely long legs, the backless dress dipping an inch below the coccyx” (72). Here, those long legs are almost unsettling and unnatural looking to Number Five. In the middle novella, *Sandwalker*, an aboriginal, is born in a very particular way: “The second came not as they are ordinarily born – that is, head foremost as a man climbs from a lower place into a high – but feet foremost as a man lets himself down into a lower place ... and for that reason his feet beat the ground for a time with no one to draw him forth” (86). Soon, he encounters a female aboriginal, and there is some indication in her talk that sexual dimorphism concerning the ability to walk is an actual feature of the aboriginal life cycle. The aboriginal girl, *Seven Girls Waiting*, describes her difficulties: “There was nothing anywhere. Pink Butterflies was new, and I could not walk far....”

Sandwalker says, “I have never known that ... but I know how it must feel, sitting alone, waiting for them to come when no one comes. It must be a terrible thing.”

Her response, though it is not explicit, suggests the gender difference: “You are a man. It will not come to you until you are old” (100). *Sandwalker* and the girl travel for a time together, and the narrative reveals that “*Seven Girls Waiting* was stumbling by the time they reached [the river]” (103). Whether their initial discussion involves locomotion or not, she clearly remains

much less sure-footed and capable of walking over long distances than Sandwalker.

Additionally, when Sandwalker was born, his grandmother undertook a very ritualistic approach to helping his mother recover: “Her mother began to scoop the sand with her hands, and when she reached that which still held the strength of the dead day’s sun, she heaped it over her daughter’s legs” (86). In this way, the healing rays of the sun are allowed to saturate into the new mother. Certainly, this resembles the fashion in which a tree’s roots might soak up the soil’s nutrients and the sun.

Continually throughout “A Story,” Sandwalker is described by the manner in which he plants his feet, as are all of the aboriginals: “The dream Sandwalker strode to him, feet lifting high, scarcely splashing when they came down” (106). His walking becomes linked to a very awkward gait: “[Sandwalker] tried again, and in a few hundred steps developed a method of walking which was reasonably silent. Knees high, he moved his feet quickly across the water and put them down with the whole foot arched like a diver. Like a wading bird, he thought.” (110)

When the aboriginals are first described, their beliefs are emphasized strongly. Curiously, their mating with trees is invoked:

“[The aborigines] would have told you that their magic and their religion, the songs they sang and the traditions of their people were what were important. They killed their sacrificial animals with flails of seashells that cut like razors, and they didn’t let their men father children until they had stood enough fire to cripple them for life. They mated with trees and drowned the children to honor their rivers.” (19-20)

It is worth remembering that this description links scars and crippling with the aboriginals. Later descriptions of supposedly French children on Ste. Anne after the war describe them with scars, and some of the officials on Ste. Croix also bear some prominent head scars, though they are

purportedly human. One of Number Five's dreams also resonates with a large circle of trees that exists on Ste. Anne:

Once I had dreamed of standing in a paved court fenced with Corinthian pillars so close set that I could not force my body between them. ... I had noticed that each column was carved with a word – the only one that I could remember was carapace – and that the paving stones of the courtyard were mortuary tablets like those set in the floors in some of the old French churches, with my own name and a different date on each. (50)

While this dream invokes the clones in Number Five's past line and the date of their deaths, the pillars which surround him are also symbolic of his current situation, ensconced as he is in a brothel of long-legged women. These pillars also resonate with the Annese natural temple of trees, which seems to have been destroyed in recent years:

The Annese temple (or observatory) has now been ruined by these settler's need for timber, all the trees cut except a few half-rotten ones. ... There were four hundred and two trees ... spaced approximately a hundred and ten feet apart so that they formed a circle about three miles in diameter. (196)

In "A Story," trees are suspiciously active in the text: "Sandwalker greeted the tree ceremoniously, asking permission to drink and promising not to stay long. A murmuring of leaves answered him, and though he could not understand the words they did not seem angry" (99). Even in the third novella, the native life on Ste. Anne, as described in the present day, seems hauntingly bizarre:

"We saw a great many people almost every day, many animals and birds, trees that were alive, just as you and I have traveling, as you say for these four days – though this is still

not the back of beyond where one sees gods come floating down the river on logs, and trees gone traveling.” (166)

It should be noted once again that Marsch describes the culture as predendritic. Given that *Seven Girls Waiting* implied to Sandwalker that the immobility from which she suffered (whatever the cause) would not come to him until his old age, it could very well be that the final stage of the male aboriginal life cycle involves a sessile tree stage, in which the aborigine develops, as per Number Five’s dream, a “carapace.” However, there is more than one indigenous species present on Ste. Croix according to “A Story,” and the other species, the Shadow children, seems even more bizarre.

They are described as twisted and tiny humanoid creatures who are always biting in “A Story,” but they seem to share a psychic link with one another. In one scene, they take control of hostile marshmen aborigines by mounting their shoulders and gouging at their eyes. Their rhetoric changes as they become outnumbered, as their empathic telepathic power confuses their identity with those around them. It is worth looking at a few of the descriptions of Shadow children within the text itself. Their bite is definitely considered dangerous: “Women at the sleeping place, wishing to frighten children still playing when their shadows were longer than themselves, said the Shadow children’s teeth dripped poison” (92). When Sandwalker meets them, he is confident that their size will allow him to face them without danger to himself: “He was equally sure now that whether the poisoned bite was real or not, he could deal with the diminutive figure facing him” (93).

However, the power of the Shadow children is, as they claim, in the mind: “We shake extension; and I am the song all the Shadow children sing, their thought when they think as one. Hold your hands before you thus, not touching. Now think of your hands gone. That is what we

shake” (96). The Shadow children extend beyond merely physical parameters and are capable of mentally controlling the hostile marshmen: “The marshman who had dropped to his knees a moment before rose shakily, and guided by the Shadow child on his shoulders staggered away” (112). The Shadow child insists that “Only the mind is significant” (113). It is worth exploring one other feature of the Shadow children: “The silent Shadow Child, who seemed less real than the gossamer figure he crouched beside, returned the chewed fiber to his mouth and wandered away” (128). The leaves that they chew from the trees on Ste. Anne seem to have some kind of white eggs within them, and it is this which the Shadow children claim make them as god. When one of them bites Eastwind in the arm, he says, “By our power I made the stars to fall; but I now do a greater magic. I make you Sandwalker and Sandwalker you. . . . That which swam in my mouth swims in his veins now” (141). Given that Sandwalker dreamed that he was dead earlier in the novel, and the fact that the “Sandwalker” who lives at the end of “A Story” notes an aching arm, the most definitive clue that Eastwind actually survives “A Story” and drowns his brother involves Sandwalker’s association with feet: the dead brother’s legs are swept out from under him before he is drowned. Afterwards, the surviving brother goes down to greet the first human explorers as they arrive. Later, in “V.R.T.,” Trenchard’s father will claim, “that great ancestor of mine who is sometimes called The Eastwind came down to make a peace with [the first French Landers]” (195). Of course, the big difference between Eastwind and Sandwalker was that Eastwind underwent ritual castration to become a holy man of the marshmen. This complicates the literal reading of the story, but it actually highlights a metaphorical difference that is quite clear: Sandwalker has functioning genitals; Eastwind does not have a mechanism for sexual reproduction.

Eastwind also has a name which invokes the air, and in “V.R.T.” the Shadow children, too, become associated with the air. At one point, a native of Ste. Anne says, “Don’t ask me how small children are” (158). In another scene, Victor Trenchard describes them as light enough to float:

“The Shadow Children of course came to steal by evening, riding up in the bubbles and the foam from the springs – then my mother would not let me go out from beneath her hair ... they’ll get all around, and then they’ll all run in at once, biting; but if you turn quickly and shout, they never do, and there are never as many of them as they think, because some are only in the minds of the others so that at the time to fight they fade back into each other and become one lonely.” (167)

The Shadow children, then, are highly associated with biting. Marsch eventually claims that he won’t be able to write because the boy’s cat (whom he eventually kills) bites him. Readings of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* which assert that the boy takes his place also have a difficult time dealing with this textual feature. The boy has a clear affection for the cat, and, at one point, Marsch even suspects that they might somehow be lovers.

This biting is also an implied threat whenever the cat is near. It approaches Marsch on several occasions: “[I was alone] with only the wind and the sun and the sighing of the great trees that trailed their roots in the murmuring water before me. Alone I should say except for our camp-follower cat, who came meowing up and had to be chased after the mules with rocks.” (171). Readers should also note the presence of sighing trees in this scene.

Finally, it is worth relating one of the incarcerated “Marsch’s” final visions:

For a moment I thought I saw my cat flying like a shadow in the dark, and I wondered if she were really dead, though I broke her neck. The day before I found the burial cave for

him, she brought me a little animal and laid it at my feet. I told her that she was a good cat and could eat it herself, but she only said, "My master, the Marquis of Carabas, sends you greetings." And disappeared again. The little animal had a pointed snout and round ears, but its teeth were the even, biting teeth of a human being, and it smiled in its agony. (247)

Here, this vision suggests that the cat flies "like a shadow," and a being which matches the description of the Shadow children from "A Story" is introduced to Marsch, with biting teeth. At this point it is also worth noting that the opening epigraph of the third novella, "V.R.T.," is from Karel Capek's "From the Point of View of a Cat." It reads, "But don't think that I am at all interested in you. You have warmed me, and now I will go out again and listen to the dark voices" (145). It is perhaps not difficult at this point to speculate why Wolfe might have opened this particular novella with the cat as narrator.

Hopefully these extensive quotes indicate that there are very real differences between the Shadow children and the aborigines on Ste. Anne. They should also display that the aborigines, especially the females, tend to be associated with odd and brittle legs, as are Aunt Jeanine and Phaedria, while the Shadow children are of ambiguous physical status, but are small and definitely tied to biting. Readers who look back at the initial novella will recall that there have been no new buildings constructed on Port Mimizon on Ste. Croix for almost two hundred years, and, when Marsch returns there from Ste. Anne, he is arrested in a nightmarish and Kafkaesque bureaucracy from which he will probably never escape. Three men who are described in a very peculiar fashion arrest Marsch: "I noticed how similar their faces were, all three with pointed chins, black brows and narrow eyes, so that they might have been brothers" (180). If shapeshifters and mimics were to dominate a place like Port Mimizon (named, after all, for

mimicry), they might soon come to resemble one another in the absence of fresh and diverse humans to imitate. Having presented many of the important textual patterns which punctuate *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, I will now proceed to the consensus reading of the text.

Almost everyone assumes that Dr. Marsch is replaced by the boy Victor Trenchard. The journal contains an explicit scene in which Marsch is bitten by a cat which has attached itself to the supposedly half-aboriginal boy, and as a result of this he claims to be unable to write for several days. On a first reading, the cat bite might be accepted as the reason for his poor handwriting. A second reading, where the memories Marsch records while in prison would seem to better fit the boy Victor Trenchard, might indicate that the cat bite is just an excuse for his poor aboriginal penmanship. In sublime fashion, the cat bite actually did cause Marsch's inability to write, but for a different reason implied in the subtext of the novella. The consensus reading of Marsch dying and being replaced by Victor Trenchard would require that the scene which depicts the death of Trenchard would be entirely fabricated. It occurs as follows: "The boy is dead. ... I saw him fall. He tried to grasp a rock, then screamed and dropped down. ... Downstream a long way, a big tree stood grasping the rock, with water at his feet, and had thrust out a root to catch my friend" (243). One of the features which lends veracity to this scene is the attempt of the tree to catch the boy; we shall return to whether this scene might be considered true or an outright fabrication soon, but analytical consensus asserts that it is a simple lie, and that Marsch dies while Victor Trenchard takes his place.

Nick Gevers attempts to make sense of this "death of Trenchard" scene by claiming that the truth is simply indeterminable. He claims that "The precise significance of "'A Story" by John V. Marsch' can never be ascertained, like the identity of its narrator. (142) He goes on to say:

By creating a narrative whose fragments can be read as the products of either character, Wolfe generates an ambiguity of a new kind: if the Self is to be discovered, whose Self will it be? The mystery of this novella is challenging to the reader, who must assimilate a multitude of clues, both logical ones and ones implicit in the flow of the narrative. If the reader cannot solve the puzzle of Marsch's true nature – and any conclusion is tenuous – the problem of self-knowledge is made yet more intractable. [...]

This is the centre of the novella's literary mystery. Did V.R.T. die in the Annese wilderness, by falling among the rocks, as Marsch's journal claims? (FHC, 185) Or did he survive to assume Marsch's role, after the anthropologist died or was murdered? If the latter is true, V.R.T. wrote the final field expedition diary entries, and all the essays and ramblings of prisoner no. 143. There is considerable evidence for the idea that V.R.T is an aboriginal, in both sets of writings; if he is mimicking Marsch, he does so imperfectly. (143-145)

As is the tendency with uncertain analysis, soon Gevers begins to doubt the sincerity of the character writing the material presented in “V.R.T.”:

The foremost possibility is that, just as the anthropologist Marsch could write 'A Story' with an aboriginal setting, he could also construct the imaginary perspective of an alien youth trying to be human. He might do this out of simple interest, or, more likely, as a way of arousing the attention of his captors and so escaping prison as an alien celebrity. He attempts to conceal the 'alien' writings when he becomes aware that his pages are annoying and not intriguing the prison authorities; he plans to destroy the sheets, and claims the references to V.R.T's parents were mere 'imagination', parts of a plan for a 'novel'. (FHC, 182) But, of course, V.R.T. might wish to hide his alien nature for the

same reason, to avoid antagonising [sic] the interrogators and warders. [...] Perhaps the man in prison is insane; his closing field journal entries contain a description of a conversation with a cat. (FHC, 188) Perhaps the views of St. Croix are correct, Marsch is an assassin, and the entire journal and all the prison notes are an ingenious subterfuge: in one interrogation, the questioner produces evidence that the journal was bogus, and that Marsch's story is a lie. (147)

Gevers assumes that the “insoluble riddle” of Marsch’s identity prevents readers from believing or disbelieving in the validity of the middle novella. The final impact of all of this, according to Gevers, is to assert the impossibility of knowing the self. However, there are only a few possibilities. One of them is that Marsch is a human being persecuted by other human beings. Another is that he is a human being unjustly incarcerated by shapeshifting aborigines who have replaced the people of Ste. Croix. A third is that he is an aborigine who has taken the place of Marsch and is now suffering at the hands of human beings. A fourth is that he is an aborigine incarcerated by aborigines who do not know what they are. The final option, the one which the *mise en abyme* of the second novella suggests, is that he is something else, a Shadow child gestalt infected by a cat bite, who is being persecuted by the aboriginals who have long since taken over Port Mimizon. After all, the Shadow children wind up riding marshmen in the middle novella, and it is only natural that, as literal as Wolfe is, the Shadow children wind up riding the man Marsch through the bite which infects him. After all, Marsch said that the cat bite caused his inability to write, and the bite switched Eastwind and Sandwalker a moment before Sandwalker’s feet were swept out from under him in “A Story.” Victor Trenchard, too, fell to his death when he lost his footing, falling into the river where Sandwalker died. In other words, every scene in Wolfe should be read as literally and metaphorically true. When the size of Shadow children is

questioned, they very well might be a microscopic organism capable of infecting others through a bite and maintaining a confused gestalt identity through their mental ability. This biological metaphor is also suggested by the very literal dream in which Marsh sees the cat flying like a shadow, and it introduces a biting Shadow child to him. Wolfe's allegorical set pieces often make sense when they are defined in such a fashion; otherwise, the dreams seem inexplicable.

These narrative conclusions are suggested through the allegorical set pieces which can be restated and applied to the greater narrative. Nick Gevers maintains that the inconclusiveness of the texts:

[S]uggests to the typical reader of Science Fiction, who assumes the accessibility and moral constancy of a character, the difficulty of defining identity, of finding the Self. *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* defines character as indefinable, subverting both personal quests for self-knowledge and the complacent certainties of the act of reading. Wolfe's subversive purpose extends to a second concern, the relationship of human and alien. Again in the conventional terms of Science Fiction, the alien is either a simple menace or a standard of strangeness subject to the ingenious if gradual comprehension of the standard, competent hero. Most experimental writers who portray the alien - such as Ursula Le Guin - modify this, making of the act of understanding the alien a sentimental and moral triumph (148)

In prison, Marsch records the childhood memories of both Victor Trenchard and John Marsch because the cat telepathically formed a gestalt understanding with them just as the Shadow children do with Sandwalker and Eastwind in "A Story." However, he is still clearly "different" to the denizens of Ste. Croix when he arrives there, as multiple clues suggest. The legs of the female aborigines who believe themselves to be humans are another clearly unusual element in

the text, as is the fact that Port Mimizon is actually constructed in the shape of a huge hand. Readers looking for useless hands to help them identify aboriginals in the text need only draw a map of Port Mimizon to find one. It is in this way that Wolfe's symbolism achieves a kind of rigorous logic that conjoins with his purpose: there *is* a huge useless hand of the aboriginals, but it is not the kind of hand readers expect, since it is geographical.

Before leaving behind *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, it is worth recording a final symbolic image. When Number Five meets his Aunt Jeanine, she follows him down a helical staircase. He runs down it naturally, but, since she cannot walk with her useless legs, she floats down the center, looking at Number Five the entire time:

With her long skirt hanging as straight as a curtain she was floating suspended, watching me, in the center of the stairwell. ... As I fled around and around the spiral she revolved with me, turning toward me always a face extraordinarily like my father's, one hand always on the railing. When we had descended to the second floor she swooped down and caught me as easily as a cat takes charge of an errant kitten, and led me through rooms and passages where I had never been permitted to go until I was as confused as I might have been in a strange building. (Wolfe, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* 29)

It should be noted that the aboriginals imitate humanity by looking upon them, and this scene shows Aunt Jeanine floating down a helix without actually walking down it: the cloned Number Five physically runs down the helix, but this scene, too, is a symbolically weighted one which indicates Aunt Jeanine's humanity is not attained via normal genetic ends. In a novel written during the 1970s about cloning and genetic engineering, a helix can only symbolize one thing – a DNA strand. In this fashion, Wolfe makes his embedded scene illustrate a much larger plot point

about Aunt Jeanine's true genetic nature. Her legs only reinforce this fact, as does the dream Number Five has the very night he meets her:

That night – I am reasonably sure it was the same night – I dreamed of the abos of Sainte Anne, abos dancing with plumes of fresh grass on their heads and arms and ankles, abos shaking their shields of woven rushes and their nephrite tipped spears until the motion affected my bed and became, in shabby red cloth, the arms of my father's valet come to summon me, as he did almost every night, to his library. (33-4)

The juxtaposition of meeting Aunt Jeanine with his first dreams of the abos is another pattern quite telling in its implications. Even the title of the third novella, "V.R.T.," is not as straightforward as it appears. In engineering, variance reduction techniques (V.R.T.) are a means of reaching a solution through a successive series of approximations. This is also clearly intentional on Wolfe's part, as he directly mentions a type of V.R.T., relaxation, in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*:

[Cloning] has been done in some chains a number of times. We have borrowed a term from engineering to describe it, and call it the process of relaxation ... There are problems which are not directly soluble, but which can be solved by a succession of approximations. ... As the levels of approximation progress, the successive sets become more and more similar until there is essentially no change." (75)

Wolfe must be approached with a scientific rigor, and pattern observation remains one of the key aspects of understanding what is occurring in his texts. When the symbols begin to congeal and the small details make a kind of sense, the intended solution begins to emerge. When Gevers confronts the corkscrew staircase, he draws a quite different conclusion:

As a boy, Number Flve comes upon hitherto unfamiliar sections of the 'Maison du Chien', such as 'a stairwell far toward the back of the house, a corkscrew, seldom-used flight, very steep, with only a low iron banister between the steps and a six-storey drop into the cellars'. (FHC, 15) The devious design of such architectures, with their hidden recesses and dangerous traps, symbolizes the perilous intricacy of the search for self-knowledge, its obscurity and unreliable enigmas. As in his novel *Peace* (1975), Wolfe makes the house an elaborate and systematic metaphor for the complexity and harrowing dilemmas of the protagonist's mind. (125-6)

Gevers continues to maintain that “all conclusions pointed by the text are – and this is by design – unreliable” (113). However, a more symbolic understanding of the story tends to clear up much of the ambiguity and confusion. The population of Port Mimizon has long since been replaced by aboriginals who no longer understand their natural life cycle, which would eventually culminate in a tree-like sessile shell. Wolfe’s embedded narratives are used to provide otherwise missing exposition throughout his entire career.

In Chapter Four, I briefly mentioned the idea that the planets Green and Blue in *The Book of the Short Sun* were actually Urth and Verthandi (Mars) from *The Book of the New Sun*, though this seems to be an impossibility in the surface text, where the protagonist, through astral travel, seems to visit all of the worlds in question, and there is little obvious indication of travel through time. Additionally, the flooding of Urth at the end of *The Book of the New Sun* heavily encourages readers to look at the possibility that Blue is Urth and that Green is the terraformed and forested Lune, also green in *Book of the New Sun*. Wolfe’s outright denial that Blue and Green were Urth and Lune in an interview is actually convincing; however, the manner in which he conceals the changes to the solar system are so metaphorical as to go beyond the merely

cryptic. In addition to setting, Wolfe has also to some degree concealed the identity of the narrator in *The Book of the Short Sun*. Horn, father of Hide and Hoof, is sent to look for Patera Silk, the great man who led the people of Viron out of the generation starship called the *Whorl* but did not leave himself. Eventually, Horn dies, but his spirit is cast into the body of Silk still on the *Whorl*. The conglomeration of Horn and Silk remains confused about his identity throughout the novel, insisting that he is Horn even as everyone around him attempts to convince him that he is indeed Silk. Horn's son Hide eventually catches up to the man who claims to be his father, and he tells this story:

When Hoof and I were real little we used to play in the pools up above your mill. ... One time we found a really pretty one, that had a lot of pretty little fish in it, and spotted frogs. Green with blue spots, I think. ... Well, while we were looking at them we saw this one leech, a red one. It was pretty big. It was swimming right at one of the frogs, and me and Hoof yelled for it to look out. ... Only the frog didn't pay attention, and just about the time it opened its mouth I figured out that it thought the leech was a fish, and it was going to eat it. ... The frog got it in its mouth and spit it out, and it swam around in back where the frog couldn't get at it, and fastened onto the back of its head. When we came back there was a dead frog, only the leech was gone. What I was thinking of was they don't look enough like fish, not really, to fool us. But that one fooled the frog, he thought it was a little fish, and it probably fooled the fish, too. Jahlee fooled me the same way until you told me. I thought there was two women in the house, an old one and the young one, but they were both her." (Wolfe, *In Green's Jungles* 345)

In this scene, Hide is talking about the vampiric inhuman Jahlee, who appears to be two different women when she was only one. In much the same fashion, his story is actually about two places

that appear to be two different places when they are in fact only one. In it, the red leech resonates with red Mars (in addition, the doubled Bluvian life serves as an allusion to Edgar Rice Burroughs' Mars books), which destroys the green frog and imitates it. This, then, is the method Wolfe chooses to embed the fate of the solar system into *The Book of the Short Sun*: Red Mars creeps closer and closer to Green Lune and destroys it – here, the leech and the frog are stand-ins for red and green planetary bodies. This talk of mimicry even has a metatextual component.

Hide also asks, “Couldn’t Jahlee come back with a new face, pretending to be someone we didn’t know?” (344). Her own mutable inhuman nature becomes embedded in the metaphor. The parasite “attaches” itself to orbit. In this scenario, if Lune is the green frog, it has been destroyed. However, Hide has no conception of the cosmic significance of the story he has just told. Later, that red leech comes up again when Hide becomes curious about why the Vanished People seem so different: “You said the Vanished People probably don’t look much like us . . . Only the inhuman look almost exactly like us. They do to us, I mean, just like that red leech I told you about looked like a fish to the frogs” (Wolfe, *In Green’s Jungles* 350). That red leech might be able to explain, through a strange kind of word association with “The Tale of the Boy Called Frog” in *The Book of the New Sun*, why the Vanished People bear so little resemblance to the humans left behind on Urth and in the Whorl, with its metaphorical depiction of tree-human hybridity. Soon, their conversation proceeds:

“I was going to say this isn’t about the Vanished People. Only I have a feeling it is, that you’ll tie it up someday.”

“I’ll tie it up, as you put it, right now. You said that the Vanished People were wiser and stronger than we are, which is certainly true. You also said that the inhuman become like us, not merely in appearance but in speech, thought, and action, in order to prey upon us.

... Since we know that the inhumis preyed upon the Neighbors – the Vanished People, as we call them here – with great success, it seems reasonable that they could counterfeit them at least as well as they counterfeit us, and very plausibly better. Will you agree to that as well? ...

“Think of the two whorls as they were thousand[s] and thousands of years ago. The Vanished People were here on Blue, the inhumis on Green, where they preyed upon the great beasts in its jungles. They exterminated the Vanished People, Hide, or very nearly – that’s why they vanished. Why didn’t they exterminate the beasts on Green long before?”
(352-3)

Here, the mystery of the imitative leech leads back to the cosmological uncertainty the characters in the text have about the Vanished People.

Elsewhere, readers might parse exactly how the generational spaceship sent by Typhon actually traveled in a large circular path to repopulate Urth, like an SF version of Noah’s ark, through another embedded story that Silk tells about a boy and his mother who left their home in Viron and then came back:

“A boy – I’ve forgotten his name, but his doesn’t matter – and his mother were returning to the city after living for a year or so in the country. ... [T]his boy and his mother had moved to the country, living in a remote farmhouse where the boy, who was still quite small, was happy in the possession of a wood and a stream too wide to jump; but lonely all the same. Now they had decided to return to the city. It was a long journey as the boy measured journeys then, though he had ridden most of the way in a sort of cart pushed by his mother that carried their belongings.

“She was very tired, and they stopped on the outskirts to spend the night with a friend before going into the city to the neat little house that another kind friend – a male friend who I suppose must have slept there from time to time, since he kept a razor there – had arranged for them to occupy some years earlier.” (Wolfe, *Return to the Whorl* 209)

As the protagonist continues to tell the story, he reveals that the boy did not fall asleep even though the mother did. Oreb asks if the boy was good, and our protagonist answers, “Not particularly, Oreb, though he thought he was, because his mother loved him. He was not old enough to understand that she would always love him, whether he behaved well or badly.” At this point, he breaks off his story for a thematically important aside, noting that the burning of the quarter twenty years ago has left it almost as desolate as the City of the Inhumi on Green. He then continues:

“I want to finish my little tale. I’ll interrupt it if I see anything worth commenting on. ... The boy decided to take a short walk. He was hoping to find another child; but he was very conscious of the danger of becoming lost, so he walked only along the road upon which the house in which he and his mother were staying stood, reasoning that he could always retrace his steps and return to her. ... Distracted by something or other, he became confused about the direction in which he had been walking. Thinking that he was returning to his mother and the house in which they were staying, he walked a long way until he saw an old man in black weeping upon the steps of a manteion. Until that time, the boy had been afraid to ask for help; but the old man looked so good and kind that the boy approached him and, after a minute or two of silent squirming ... he said, ‘Why are you crying?’

“The old man looked up, and seeing him pointed to the carts, wagons, and litters that passed them every few seconds. ‘If the wrongs I have done the gods were visible ... there would be more than those, and four men would not be enough to weep for them all.’”

(Wolfe, *Return to the Whorl* 210)

The protagonist and his companions walk on in silence, seeing the hovels made of salvaged timbers, until Pig finally asks if that is the end of the story. Silk’s bird Oreb asks if the boy ever found his home. “Yes, he did. ... But he was not the same boy ... And that is not the same home.”

Begging leave of their company and promising to rejoin them later, the man who will become the Rajan of Gaon goes on alone. When he arrives at the cenoby where Silk once served, inside he finds “weeds and blackberry brambles, and – yes – a straggling grape vine climbing the blackened stump of the fig tree. Enough of their arbor remained to sit on” (213). This return to a place which was once home, overrun by weeds and vines, is highly symbolic of what has actually happened to humanity as a whole, which has become lost, and whose cities have crumbled beneath the weight of all that potentially hostile vegetation.

In the story the protagonist tells, some of the background details of *The Book of the Long Sun* are certainly implied, which include the old rumors of the Caldé’s folly and Silk’s childhood with his mother, in which they may have been sent out of town to avoid the fallout over Caldé Tussah’s fall from grace (for purchasing an illegal embryo which was eventually grown into Silk). In addition, the story represents the most explicit metaphor for the Plan of Pas (Typhon’s name on the *Whorl*, a digitized copy of his personality ruling as a god from mainframe) that readers will ever get. The boy and his mother (in this case, serving as both stand-ins for Silk and Typhon’s lover, Kypris, who acted from time to time to help her son, even though he was

unaware of their relationship, and also justly representative of the remnants of humanity on the *Whorl*) are sent into the countryside away from their home (the *Whorl* was sent out from Urth with Silk's embryo and the personality of Kypris aboard). The time has come for it to return home (in this reading, its mission is particularly ark-like, preserving the seed of ancient humanity from the flood at the coming of the New Sun). However, the mother and child do not make it to the home which has been prepared for them (Green, as the inhumis Quetzal directed the lander towards when the crew first started to leave the *Whorl* at the end of *The Book of the Long Sun*), but stop at another house instead (in this case, Blue). When the child goes out to explore on his own, he soon becomes lost (as humanity is, even though they have traveled the same path to home that they should, they do not know where they are, assuming it to be some far distant destination from their ancestral planet of origin.) The old man that the boy meets, who weeps for all of those sins, seems to be some fragment of old humanity left behind to wallow in regret and remorse. That ancient man represents the inhumis, who not only emulate humanity, but also claim to be human, though they have lost something vital that keeps them from being complete on their own. The ending of the hero's story is inconclusive, as it is for *The Book of the Short Sun* as a whole, because the people of Blue may never realize where they actually are, unable to perceive a home that is no longer suited to them. Through these embedded stories, Wolfe provides complete narrative and thematic closure. There are many other examples in *The Book of the Short Sun*, but this one is especially worth noting for a rather small detail.

One of the chilling features of this story involves the razor which the mother's friend keeps at the house, which implies that he intends to live there. Mindful of the bird Oreb's ubiquitous plea, "No cut!" that razor strongly suggests sacrifice. This, then, might be the clearest sign readers get of Pas's plan to return to Urth, in sacrificing his son so that he may walk his old

world again (a *patera* is, after all, actually a broad, shallow dish used for pouring libations, and could be filled or emptied easily). Some of Silk's meteoric rise to prominence within the *Whorl* can easily be justified by his part in the Plan of Pas. However, in the first and last chapter of *The Book of the Short Sun*, we are presented with a very specific effort on the part of the people of Blue to bring the gods of mainframe down to their new planet. Hide notes in the very first chapter, "Amberjack says that old Prolocutor's trying to build a Sacred Window" (Wolfe, *On Blue's Waters* 32). For all its talk of gods, mention of this project will be curiously muted until the return of Silk to Viron: "It is – ah – coming ... If not in my, er, time, then in my acolyte's we will have a working Window, um, Horn." ...

"Without Mainframe, no god can come to it, your Cognizance" (Wolfe, *Return to the Whorl* 401). That effort to create a Sacred Window on Blue represents the possibility of Pas returning to rule and possess the people as he sees fit. With this rather ambiguous threat looming over the planet, Silk decides to leave, taking the *Whorl* with him, in what might be the final act of Typhon's redemption.

The final embedded allegory this chapter will present, told by Inclito's mother in front of the protagonist, involves a fierce rivalry for her hand, in which her dead lover Turco gets revenge on all of the others who follow him in courting her with a poisoned fang hidden in a pair of boots. Her story ends:

Gioioso had found the boots and worn them when he went hunting. The dried poison from the fang had entered his foot slowly until there was enough to stop his heart. Poor Solenno had found them too, in the back of the closet that had become his, and had worn them when he went to look at my father's muddy field.

It is all simple and reasonable, you will say. I am older than any of you, and it seems to me that there is more to be said. Turco had avenged himself, as the strego had warned Casco he would. Have you ever seen another person who reminded you of yourself? ... We never do, you see. I have been told many times that such-and-such a woman looks exactly like me. And I have visited her and spoken to her, and come away feeling that no one could resemble me less. So it was with Turco. To my mother and me, Gioioso and Solenno seemed very like Turco. But to Turco himself they resembled Casco. Like Casco, they were rivals for my hand. And they wore boots of the same size, after all."

(Wolfe, *In Green's Jungles* 56-7)

Even this story resonates thematically with the greater conflict in the backdrop of *The Book of the Short Sun*, with the bloody struggle between the serpentine inhumis, the Vanished People, and the remnants of humanity who have escaped the *Whorl*. When they look at one another, they see only rivalry, but in reality, in a truer light, they are all branches of the same species, who desire the same transcendence. This only becomes clear through mapping a smaller story onto the greater one directly.

After years of reading and rereading Wolfe's fictions, the structural, allegorical patterns which emerge eventually become more self-evident. Unfortunately, the initial allegorical understanding requires an intuitive leap that most readers seem unwilling to accept as valid and are reluctant to embrace without copious and extended explanation. In the novel *Home Fires*, Wolfe includes a strange voodoo ritual in which the protagonist Chelle chooses a gun to suit her. The features of each gun correspond to the people attempting to influence her life, and rather than choosing the black and white handled gun which resonates with her husband, she selects an officer's gun (though she served as an enlisted member of the military, portions of her body were

repaired with the officer Jane Simm's remains after an explosion – this highlights the spectral influence that officer has on the rest of her decisions in the text.) In *A Borrowed Man*, even more absurdly, a scene in which a strange figure named Chick gives the narrator three sandwiches after pouring Swan-n-Sweetheart brandy into hot chocolate ties together some narrative elements and symbols (which include a deceased man named Cob Coldbrook and his fiancée – a cob is of course a young swan; furthermore, the narrator will encounter three “reclones” of an unpopular poet, his ex-wife, over the course of the novel, before leaving one of them with Cob's sister. The three sandwiches become metonymies for the otherwise inexplicably reclone woman.)

After this whirlwind look at some of the features of Wolfe's fiction, it is possible to assert that a particular reading method can be fruitfully employed to recreate missing narrative closure in Gene Wolfe's fiction: rereading the text for structural patterns and resonance can reveal what no longer makes narrative sense (such as the three years missing in “The Changeling” or the pervasive story of Goldwurm and Ambrosius in *The Sorcerer's House*, which never seemed to mean much within the text itself.) Next, paying special attention to religious themes and symbols, especially Catholic sacraments, often also highlight missing narrative elements (such as the arrest of Nadan and his probable execution on Holy Thursday and Good Friday in “Seven American Nights” or the transubstantiation of the eucharist in *The Book of the Short Sun*, which signified a transition between flesh and vegetable matter, a communion through consumption heavily implied by the treatment of the foliage throughout the text.) Finally, seeking narrative closure in allegorical embedded stories, while it requires intuition, allows seemingly unfinished narrative strains to be fully realized (as in *The Book of the Short Sun*, in which a red leech and a green frog describe the fate of the solar system.) Wolfe writes with a unity that belies the impression of critics who believe that his symbolism never resolves and that his themes support a

multiplicity of irreconcilable world views. While he is not a writer of propaganda or simple texts, his spiritual and historical allusions create a framework for his fiction that situates it firmly in an existing tradition that, whether we believe it is or not, Wolfe treats as objective reality.

Chapter Seven: 'Tis Vain, O Youth, To Fly the Call of Apollo – A Brief

Conclusion

The majority of this dissertation has focused on a highly idiosyncratic author and some reading strategies which, I hope, are aimed at unearthing intentionality in theme and plot in Gene Wolfe's fiction. The largest distinction between subjective reception and objective features of the text involve what can be fruitfully argued about: anyone could argue that Able in *A Wizard Knight* is an exceedingly flawed protagonist or that Wolfe's treatment of women in that work seems to fall into a dichotomy between mother and temptress, but Wolfe is fairly unique in that objective features of his narrative such as setting and time period might also be up for debate. *The Wizard Knight* certainly indicates that much of the action is set within the borders of Celidon in Mythgarthr, though my argument hinges upon its real setting as the womb or dream of Able's mother. It is not controversial to assert that Faulkner knew if one of his stories was set in Yoknapatawpha County or not; setting is an objective feature of the text which Wolfe either specifically planned out or did not. However, it is entirely possible that a reader will misapprehend features such as the narrator's identity, the chronological sequence of events, or the actual cosmology in a Gene Wolfe story; this dissertation claims that all of these heavily genre-dependent aspects of his fiction are put in place by Wolfe before his structure is effaced from the final draft. This engineering is not a typical writing process, and it is necessary to qualify all of this analysis with the possibly obvious warning that this approach works for Gene Wolfe in particular and not for any other creative author.

However, Gene Wolfe is not the only writer in the history of literature who has a penchant for puzzles and games. In that regard, he is perhaps most similar to Vladimir Nabokov. While there is not space to analyze Nabokov's complex fiction at the great length it deserves in

relationship to Wolfe's own oeuvre, it is possible to discuss structural features of at least one of his stories and the consensus opinion of its "meaning" derived from his own extra-textual statements. Indeed, the most common criticism of his short story "The Vane Sisters" actually involves Nabokov's tendency to a cleverness bordering on vanity, as it operates on what might be called a textual gimmick.

The story begins from the point of view of a professor of French Literature, who notices a formation of ice that draws him to a seemingly chance meeting with an ex-coworker. This man, known only as D., lets the narrator know that the elder Vane sister of the title, Cynthia, has passed away from some heart problem. The narrator originally becomes involved with the sisters when her younger sibling, Sybil, appends a suicide note to the bottom of a final exam in his class, distraught over the loss of her married lover, D. By the time the narrator reads the scribbled note and contacts Sybil's sister, Sybil is already dead. The second act of the story chronicles this professor's unlikely relationship with Cynthia, in which his pragmatism and attention to detail clash with her spiritualism and fascination with the realms of the dead and mystical séances.

Nabokov's situational irony springs to life effectively in this story because the narrator actually believes he is an excellent observer of the world. After encountering the precipitating icicles, he proclaims, "I walked on in a state of raw awareness that seemed to transform the whole of my being into one big eyeball rolling in the world's socket" (Nabokov, "The Vane Sisters" 790). The most sublime aspect of the story involves the séance he attends, in which the spirits of literary figures such as Oscar Wilde and Tolstoy appear, amidst other figures. One would assume that a professor of literature would be astute enough to understand what is occurring when "Oscar Wilde came in and in rapid garbled French, with the usual anglicisms,

obscurely accused Cynthia's dead parents of what appeared in my jottings as '*plagiatisme*.'" In this case, a French Literature professor is woefully unaware of the connotation of Wilde's accusations of plagiarism; the plot in which he is embroiled with the Vane Sisters, names and all, is cribbed from an Oscar Wilde novel. As David Eggenschwiler notes in "Nabokov's 'The Vane Sisters': Exuberant Pedantry and a Biter Bit," the multiple allusions to history, literature, and to seemingly inane details are lost on the narrator, but they can still be appreciated by readers.

Eggenschwiler writes:

At the beginning of the story the reader is betrayed, misled about the character of the narrator and seduced into affection and admiration, which lessen as he reads further. As the imposing speaker tells of his meanderings one Sunday, we must find him clever, imaginative, lyrical, fanciful, and sensuously attentive. But when he tells of the two Vane sisters and his relations with them, we gradually find him to be less than we first had cause to expect. (33)

Fittingly, Nabokov chooses to reveal the narrator's ignorance through literary allusions that this arrogant literature professor remains woefully blind towards. Oscar Wilde's accusation is, of course, referring to the name of the younger sister, Sybil, culled from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. That Sybil, too, kills herself over a man whose name starts with a D., just as this Sybil decides, "Death was not better than D minus, but definitely better than Life minus D" (Nabokov, "The Vane Sisters" 792). That ironic distance between Nabokov's design element and the perceptions of the narrator allows readers to see how thoroughly their first-person lens into the events of the story fails to apprehend his direct experiences. This does not preclude the possibility that those outside the narrator's frame of reference actually might understand more

completely, just as is the case with many of the stories of Gene Wolfe presented in previous chapters.

Ultimately, “The Vane Sisters” is famous for its “trick” last paragraph. While much is made of Cynthia’s preoccupation with the afterlife and her ideas of “intervening auras” as well as her certainty that her sister is not pleased with her beyond the borders of death, the narrator remains aloof and condescending: “Cynthia was above generalities as she was beyond logic” (794). At one point, they begin discussing her interest in acrostics and coded messages, and the narrator notes, “I wish I could recollect that novel or short story (by some contemporary writer, I believe) in which, unknown to its author, the first letters of the words in its last paragraph formed, as deciphered by Cynthia, a message from his dead mother” (795). When the final paragraph of the narrator’s own assessment of the Vane Sisters closes, employing that trick infamously reveals “Icicles by Cynthia, meter from me, Sybil.” The very dripping icicles which directed the narrator’s attention at the very start of the story, whose notice he attributed to his own keen senses, were set up by an external force of which he had no understanding, far beyond the parameters of his logic and reason.

While this transforms the story itself into something of a supernatural tale in which the seances and spiritual aspects are more or less “real,” the overall effect binds author and reader in a sophisticated alliance beyond the materialist assumptions and overconfidence of the narrator: deciphering the story becomes a shared game featuring a structural textual puzzle. Readers oblivious to Nabokov’s allusions and metatextual suggestions still experience the conflicting themes of the story as the narrator mocks Cynthia, even as he is dragged from one spiritual investigation to another at her whim. By the end, he is losing sleep actively looking for signs of Cynthia trying to reach him, while the Vane Sisters have been directing his actions all along.

In an era in which examples of pure metafiction are quite common, it is worth discussing the nature of Nabokov's text. While Kenneth Kupsch acknowledges the artistic integrity of the story despite some of the criticisms of coldness, over-cleverness, and vapidness thrown at it in "The Extra-ordinary Art of 'The Vane Sisters,'" he comes close to ignoring the suspension of disbelief necessary for this type of explicitly genre fiction to maintain its immersive and ultimately ironic power. Kupsch highlights some of the responses to the story:

In particular, it is in reaction to the now-famous ending, with its elaborate acrostic message hidden in the final paragraph, that one finds the most skeptical reaction to Nabokov's art being exhibited. Yet it is precisely in that, for some, too-precious ending where the thoughtful and sensitive reader shall discover the objectives of more conventional storytelling not only being matched, but also being demonstrated as strikingly inferior by comparison. (300-1)

Whether this is hyperbole or not, Kupsch comes close to dismissing the reality of the supernatural in the tale, probably from a lifetime of digesting mimetic and realistic fiction, when he seems surprised that the metaphysical nature of the story does not raise the objections its artistic features do. Kupsch makes some pragmatic and materialist assumptions that echo the narrator of the story and his attitudes toward the artificiality of his spiritual experiences: "Yet it is precisely the sort of skepticism toward the lucubrations of Cynthia and her clan that the intelligent reader must necessarily share with the story narrator, whether we choose to like him personally or not, which will prove 'The Vane Sisters' such a powerful and original piece of storytelling in the end" (306). Kupsch argues that the most logical explanation for the acrostic "is that the narrator knowingly placed it there himself. Certainly this is easier to explain than that Cynthia, of all people, should have been among the first phantoms to realize that to send a

message successfully one might actually have to make it distinguishable from the world of everyday” (307). It seems that Kupsch shares the world view the author is indirectly mocking with his ironic distance from the narrator’s self-confidence, while Nabokov’s text actually revels in an existence completely free from its professor’s preconceptions. The sisters are not interested purely in sending a message to the narrator, but in manipulating events so that they are remembered. After their attention-grabbing diversion, our narrator will discover the fate of Cynthia and become fascinated once again by the nature of their relationship. Kupsch’s position willfully ignores the situational irony, which Nabokov creates through having such a careful and educated “eye” miss what is obviously right in front of him. Seriously entertaining the idea that the narrator plants the acrostic in his writing ignores the parameters of the game Nabokov establishes and the genre of the story: fictions and representations are ultimately imitations bordering on invention, but they are not bound by the rules of reality. No one would think to question that Horatio and his friends encounter *something* on the battlements that certainly resembles the ghost of Hamlet the elder. Fiction is not bound by Kupsch’s materialist, reductionist approach.

According to J. Morris in “The Gliding Eye: Nabokov’s Marvelous Terror,” human consciousness truly interested Nabokov:

Nabokovian fiction can be seen as an attempt to investigate and mimic in prose the gliding movements of human consciousness, our strange and glorious knack for satisfying curiosity about others by inhabiting them imaginatively. “[T]he soul is but a manner of being – not a constant state,” says the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: “Any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations.” ... He rejected ‘realism’ in the old-fashioned sense – the author’s implicit pact with the reader to render

both invisible – in favor of a kind of collegial acknowledgement of the artifices of fiction. He did this, I think, for a sound and simple reason: ‘realism’ is, for Nabokov, deeply unrealistic. It ignores the conscious and self-conscious presence of the gliding I, the one who perceives, imagines, and ultimately creates reality. Nabokov wanted to help good readers participate in that “Marvel . . . that sudden window singing open on a sunlit landscape amidst the night of non being.” (Morris 163-4)

“The Vane Sisters” is preoccupied with death. Morris claims that, for Nabokov, death “provides the only passport with which our type of time-bound consciousness can travel to meet the creator — though we may glimpse his or her patterns throughout our lives. This idea accounts for the rather gnostic linking of mortality with ultimate revelation that haunts Nabokov’s work” (167). Indeed, he even claims: “Godlike authorial interventions, along with ingenious techniques to take readers up and out of the text, are one way Nabokov played out his forays beyond consciousness” (168). Once again, the presence of the acrostic is still widely accepted as a de rigueur and valid aspect of the text because Nabokov himself emphasized it to get the story published:

In his famous letter to Katharine A. White, the chief editor of *The New Yorker*, while explaining the intricate riddle-like structure of "The Vane Sisters," which had been rejected by the magazine, Nabokov mentioned that some of his stories written in the past had been composed according to the same system "wherein a second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial semitransparent one." As an example, he named another story with such an "inside"--"Signs and Symbols," which had been published in *The New Yorker*.

Thanks to Nabokov's explanations, the "inner scheme" of "The Vane Sisters" has become a common property. It is a story of the intervention by gentle spirits (or ghosts) into the reality of the narrator, "a callous observer of the superficial planes of life," crowned by the secret message in the finale that can be decoded by the rules of acrostic reading. To quote the letter to Katherine A. White again, "everything in the tale leads to one recurring end, or rather forms a delicate circle, a system of mute responses, not realized by the Frenchman but directed by some unknown spirit at readers." (Dolinin)

Clearly, Nabokov writes palimpsests much as I argue that Wolfe does, and, by and large, the extratextual assertions Nabokov made about the story's subtext are considered to be objective features of the text.

However, not every author who might be said to write puzzling (if not "puzzle box") fiction has the same commitment to the ability of underlying structure to create meaning. Generally considered to be one of the transitional figures between modern and postmodern literary occupations, Samuel Beckett is another unique literary figure who flirts with the enigmatic and the allusive. In *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, J.D. O'Hara talks about the possibility of readers knowing more than the narrators through which they experience the fictional world:

In a much-noted passage in *Tom Jones*, the narrator solemnly assures us that he has been unable to discover what, at one point, Tom ate for dinner. The remark's humor is based on our assumption that narrators are omniscient, at least in the sense that authors invent their stories and therefore can never be at a loss to know what happens in them. Of course novelists have frequently taken on themselves the task of communicating ideas through ignorant narrators, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, *Ulysses*, and "The Secret Sharer." Their

method has been to put the character's perceptions in a context – of the work or life – that will contradict, modify, or supplement his limited point of view. Huck Finn approves of slavery, but we don't; Twain relies on our morality to correct Huck's. In *Ulysses*, Bloom at a Catholic mass watches communion ... and Joyce relies on our knowledge of the mass to correct Bloom's misinterpretation of the priest's gesture. ...

Beckett too uses this device of the ignorant narrator, of course. ... But for the most part we may say that Beckett has removed the omniscient narrator and replaced him with an ignorant but uncorrectable narrating hero. (7)

O'Hara goes on to categorize Beckett as someone who creates a narrative voice born of ignorance of which no greater knowledge can be attained:

But the world of a first-person narrative, like our own individual worlds, is necessarily solipsistic; nothing exists in it until perceived. ... Now the thinking and perceiving mind, faulty though it is, is all in all. Its world is therefore like itself, faulty and incomplete, but Beckett makes no effort to improve and complete it. If we cannot do so ourselves, if the narrator's limitations are our own, then we are forced not merely to notice his ignorance as we notice Huck's or Bloom's, but to admit our own ignorance as well. (8)

O'Hara sees this as a symptom of modernity and its preoccupations, with the breakdown of certainties and faith, in which perception undergoes constant reversals and difficulties. O'Hara also includes an interview which Beckett gave to Israel Shenker, actually essential to defining the exact difference between the truly open and decentered texts of postmodernism and the rigorous, convoluted, but soluble labyrinths begging for gnosis that I insist are the most apt metaphor for categorizing Wolfe's work:

The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think ignorance has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a kind of esthetic axiom that expression is achievement – must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unuseable – as something by definition incompatible with art.

I think that anyone nowadays, who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er. The other type of artist – the Apollonian – is absolutely foreign to me. (8)

Here, a name is finally given to the self-conscious engineer of controlled structure, thanks to Beckett (who, through omission, identifies himself as a Dionysian artist). This dissertation attempts to prove the idea that Wolfe is a purely Apollonian artist due to his personal beliefs and the manner in which he immanentizes the religious, historical, and literary features of his work. It is only fitting that Beckett himself implies a binary structural juxtaposition to describe himself against other artists.¹⁸ However, not everyone accepts that humanity must always occupy an existence of not-knowing and incapability, and the Apollonian artist of order might even prove capable of transmitting his or her own certainties behind the vagaries of language even as he or she embraces them. Lack of confidence in one's mastery is hardly a platform to pronounce

¹⁸ The other possibility is that Beckett is himself being intentionally ironic and obtuse here, and that he actually knows what, for example, the “ontologically unknowable” Unnamable of the third book of his Dionysian-themed trilogy actually is in Apollonian fashion, with its rounded head and single eye leaking forever, occasionally replaced with other aspects of itself, Mahood and the Worm, even as it is beaten incessantly to the point of regurgitation in the darkness. However, I couldn't possibly name my own suspicions in polite company.

totalitarian statements about the rest of humankind and the manner in which it perceives the universe.

Of course, much of the subtext of this dissertation hints that the intention of an artist can be grasped. However, there are several avant-garde developments in literature and other media over the course of the last two centuries that truly do complicate that kind of assertion. In particular, the composition strategy of William S. Burroughs might be said to reveal the illusory nature of intentionality: his cut-up and folding methods involved taking random patterns from different texts and combining them. Of course, one of his starting principles was that language itself was a totalizing system that inherently denied its users the ability to express themselves in unique ways. His technique was designed to free creators from the tyranny of linguistic systems, and, in its own way, produce a kind of truth.

While Burroughs' subconscious choices and the rigid framework used to create the cut-ups may not have been purely random, the design choices he made ensured that any extended theme or meaning in the work would be the product of accident: his intentional architecture robbed his structures of cohesion. While analysis of his texts is certainly possible, allowing random fluctuations from many different sources and from other creative founts intentionally works against the unity of a work. In other words, the compositional style of each author should be considered in assessing the nature of their texts and what kind of analyses might be most fruitful. The failure of some critics to engage with the themes of Wolfe's work stem from a misunderstanding of his artistic priorities, which are, in the final analysis, purely Apollonian.

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MARC ARAMINI
7854 N Pebble Dr
Kingman, AZ 86401
702-355-2125
marcaramini@gmail.com

EDUCATION

PhD, English, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) May 2019

Dissertation: “Does It Mean? Gene Wolfe, Perverse Puzzle-Maker”
Committee: Felicia Campbell (chair), Gary Totten, Vincent Perez, Satish Bhatnagar

MA, English, Northern Arizona University 2002

BS, Biochemistry, University of Notre Dame 2000

HONORS AND AWARDS

Nominee, Hugo Award for Best Related Work 2016

Outstanding Graduate Teacher, Northern Arizona University 2002

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Graduate Teaching Assistant, English, UNLV 2016-present

Courses taught:

English 101 • Composition I
English 102 • Composition II
English 231S • World Literature for Science Majors
English 426B • Mythology

Resident Faculty, English, Mohave Community College 2011-2013

Courses taught:

TRE 089 * Transitional English
English 101 * Basic Composition
English 102 * Literature and Composition

Instructor/Tutor, Huntington Learning Center 2010-2011

Associate Faculty, English, Mohave Community College 2002-2003

Courses taught:

English 101 * Basic Composition
English 102 * Literature and Composition

Teacher, Biology & Life Science, Lake Havasu High School 2002-2003

Graduate Teaching Assistant, English, Northern Arizona U

2001-2002

Courses taught:

English 105 * Academic Reading and Writing

English 205 * Rhetoric and Writing

PUBLICATIONS

Work-in-Progress

Behind Sword and Spirit: An Exploration of the Fiction of Gene Wolfe, 2002-2018. Castalia House, 2019 (under contract).

Books

Beyond Time and Memory: An Exploration of the Fiction of Gene Wolfe, 1987-2001. Castalia House, 2018 (forthcoming).

Between Light and Shadow: An Exploration of the Fiction of Gene Wolfe, 1951-1986. Castalia House, 2015. (Hugo nominee for Best Related Work.)

Articles

“The Refuge of Art: Piercing the Silence of Death in Nabokov’s ‘Vane Sisters.’” UNLV World Literature Essay Series (forthcoming).

“There Will Be Vengeance! Apocalyptic Anger after ‘Ride a Tin Can.’” *Feast of Laughter* vol. 5, 2018 (forthcoming).

“Proving Veil’s Hypothesis: Variance Reduction Techniques, Larval Life Cycles on an East Wind, and Shadow Children riding Mars(c)hmen in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*.” *Ultan’s Library*, 1 Sep 2014. ultan.org.uk/variance-reduction-techniques/.

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Special Guest, "Operation Ares Wrap Up with Marc Aramini." The Gene Wolfe Literary Podcast. Claytemple Media. 9 Apr. 2018. <https://www.claytemplemedia.com/operation-ares>

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PROFESSIONAL SERVICE & EXPERIENCE

Technical and Copy Editor, *Popular Culture Review* (peer-review journal), 2016-present

Program Coordinator, Far West Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Annual Conference, Las Vegas, 24-26 Feb. 2017, 23-25 Feb. 2018, 22-24 Feb. 2019

Lead Faculty Advisor, Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, Mohave Community College, 2010-2013

PRESENTATIONS

"Becoming a Man in Gene Wolfe's *Wizard Knight*." Far West Popular Culture Association Conference, 24 Feb. 2019.

Guest Lecture: "Decadence, Decay, and the American Dream: Gene Wolfe's 'Seven American Nights.'" UNLV, 12 Sept. 2018.

"Disney, Final Fantasy, and the Mickey Mafia." Far West Popular Culture Association Conference, 25 Feb. 2017.

"Unexamined Faith: Chaucer's Squire's Tale." Rocky Mountain Medieval Renaissance Association Conference, May 2002.

REFERENCES

Dr. Gary Totten, Professor of English and Department Chair, UNLV

Dr. Felicia Campbell, Professor of English, UNLV

Dr. Vincent Perez, Associate Professor of English, UNLV

Dr. Jarret Keene, Visiting Assistant Professor of English and World Literature Program
Coordinator, UNLV

Dr. John Kitts, Faculty, English, Mohave Community College