



Solar Labyrinth

Exploring Gene Wolfe's *BOOK OF THE NEW SUN*

ROBERT BORSKI

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Robert Borski

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“The unraveling of a riddle is the purest and most basic act of the human mind.” Vladimir Nabokov

Conclusive Evidence

“There’s nothing worse than a labyrinth that has no center.” Jorge Luis Borges quoting G. K. Chesterton.

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FOREWORD

This book is not meant for the casual reader of Gene Wolfe. But if like me and other longtime fans of the writer, you've learned that Gene Wolfe can best be appreciated and understood with multiple re-readings, perhaps you've come to the right place. Because over the years, and starting with the original publication, I've had the opportunity to read the five books of the Urth Cycle a dozen times or so, and as I have, I've proceeded from being near totally lost and confused about many *New Suns* twists and turns to a comfort level where I can begin to talk about some of the pathways I've discovered into Wolfe's solar labyrinth. I'm therefore proposing you now allow me to be your tour guide for a while and can almost guarantee you I will reveal things about the book that you will not have realized before. And while you may not always agree with me, I do believe that the one thing you will want to do after you have finished this guide is go back and read Gene Wolfe's epic masterpiece yet again.

On the other hand, if you prefer ambiguity, like your mysteries unresolved, or desire to find your own way unassisted...Well, it is no easy path I seek to illuminate, reader. And all labyrinths—even well-lit ones—should be entered guardedly. So if you wish to walk no further with me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Special thanks also to Roy Lackey, whose sharp eye and unflinching dedication caught many of the early mistakes in the manuscript. Any untidy grammar, solecisms, or ill turns of phrase that remain are strictly the responsibility of the author.

A NOTE ABOUT CITATIONS

Shadow = *Shadow of the Torturer* (Simon & Schuster, 1980)

Claw = *Claw of the Conciliator* (Timescape, 1981)

Sword = *Sword of the Lictor* (Timescape, 1981)

Citadel = *Citadel of the Autarch* (Timescape, 1983)

(All four volumes comprising *The Book of the New Sun*, a.k.a. *New Sun* or *The Book*.)

Urth = *Urth of the New Sun* (TOR, 1987)

CATHERINE

Of the many mysteries that pervade Gene Wolfe's *New Sun* series, perhaps the one most interesting and central to the Book involves the pedigree of Severian.¹ Because the torturers refresh their membership with the male children of those they execute, Severian has come to the Order of the Seekers for Truth and Penitence as an orphan, never having known or being told who his parents are. This is not to say he is unable to riddle them out, for by the end of the *New Sun* quartet he's realized that his father is a man by the name of Ouen—a waiter at the Inn of Lost Loves—while his mother is Catherine, a runaway from the Pelarine sect, who also just happens to be the young woman who impersonates Saint Katharine in various Guild ceremonies. (Katharine is patron saint of the torturers.)

It also turns out Severian has been keeping company, amorous and otherwise, with Ouen's mother, Dorcas, who's been resurrected by him from the Lake of Birds in the Botanic Garden. Dorcas' husband—who's actually Severian's grandfather—has been encountered slightly earlier; he's the ancient boatman who spends his days on the Lake, seeking to retrieve his beloved Cas from the tannin-rich (and thus preservational) waters, having originally deposited her there upon her death many decades ago. (While not given, I suspect his name is meant to be *Caron*, recalling the obvious *Charon*—the Greek ferryman of the dead; providentially at least, such a saint exists, and this would adhere to Wolfe's naming stratagems.) And so we readers are given this much—we know who Severian's parents and paternal grandparents are. We're also told about a possible twin sister. (See *Severn*.) But what about the maternal side of the family? Are we meant to know nothing about the mysterious Catherine and who perhaps her parents are? Is the delineation of the Severian family tree meant to be lopsided and single-branched or are there clues in the text about Catherine and her bloodline?

Critic John Clute, of course, has already undertaken a stab at further unraveling Severian's maternal roots in his seminal book of essays, *Strokes*. But while his initial conclusions parallel those mentioned above, he also attempts to penetrate the identity of Catherine. Clute asserts—and not without marshaling his arguments from text—that Catherine and Severian's predecessor in office, the old Autarch, are one and the same. This approach is based almost entirely on the bold supposition that the old Autarch, whose androgyny is oft noted in the Book, is a woman. Argues the erudite Clute since a woman could just as easily be unsexed by the Hierodules for failing to bring the New Sun, "he might well be a 'she; and since the old Autarch is never identified by name or soubriquet, certainly there's no reason it couldn't be Catherine the Wheel. These are not unreasonable conclusions, and to be fair, Clute wrote his essay before Wolfe's sequel, *The Urth of the New Sun*, was published; but he also ignores important evidence gleaned from "The Cat," an ancillary work of short fiction set in the Urth milieu, wherein we learn the old Autarch's name is Appian—which being male seems to vitiate much of Clute's argument. But another place he short circuits his thesis is in asserting a key piece of evidence to be the *only* phrase in Wolfe's quartet signally set off by ellipses, whereas there are actually at least 16 such phrases. And so it seems unlikely that Severian's mother and his predecessor are one and the same (although the essay in itself is still a fascinating read and has had more than a subtle influence on my exegetical methods).

But then who *is* Catherine? Perhaps, before continuing, it's best to examine what little we do know about her, citing what we can from the quartet.

Long before he realizes what her relationship to him might be, Severian has seen Catherine a number of times, always in the guise of St. Katharine during Guild ceremonies. Comments he on her identity: “Of the maid I can tell you nothing. When I was very young, I did not even wonder about her. Those are the earliest feasts I can remember.” (*Shadow*, 106)

Later, however, when he is older, he has other, more developed, conceits:

Perhaps she was a servant from some remote part of the Citadel. Perhaps she was a resident of the city, who for gain or because of some old connection with the guild consented to play the part; I do not know. I only know that each feast found her in her place, and so far as I could judge, unchanged. She was tall and slender, though not so tall nor slender as Thecla, dark of complexion, dark of eyes, and of raven of hair. (*Shadow*, 106)

As for what happens to Catherine after the ceremony’s conclusion, or where she goes, Severian informs us: “What became of the maid I do not know. She disappeared as she has each Katharine day I can remember.” (*Shadow*, 108—109)

Is there important information to be sieved from the above? Well, Catherine’s height does seem to suggest she is either an armigette or an exultant, since there is a relationship between height and social class. And since we’re also told later that “Most of the Pelerines are either armigettes or exultants,” it seems fairly reasonable to assume Catherine belongs to one or the other of these two upper classes. Yet another important detail may be her changelessness, at least as far as Severian perceives it. Granted, in his younger days, he may not have been especially perceptive about the effects of aging, but he also has redoubtable mnemonic skills. Given that he’s probably seen Catherine over a range of at least fifteen years, it seems likely Catherine would have aged some and he would have eventually noticed. So perhaps this is a clue—as is a possible earlier connection to the guild and Catherine’s steadfast disappearance after each ceremony, as well as her dark eyes, skin, and hair.

Curiously enough, the woman who eventually becomes Severian’s wife, Valeria, comes closest to filling this description. A dweller within the Atrium of Time, she’s first encountered by Severian when he comes up through a mazelike series of tunnels looking for his lost dog Triskele. Sensing he’s being watched, Severian turns around and notices “a young woman dressed in furs standing before a door at the opposite side of the court.” (*Shadow*, 43) Moreover, there’s “an antique quality about her metal-trimmed dress and the shadow of her dark hair that made her seem older than Master Palaemo, a dweller in forgotten yesterdays.” Valeria—as she’s named—leads him inside, where there are “stiff antique chairs.” Here she regales Severian with her knowledge of dead languages (rendered in Latin by Wolfe) and tells him a little bit about her family, who at one time had wanted “to leave Urth with the autarch of their era, then had waited because there was nothing for them but waiting.” (*Shadow*, 4) Currently, however, the family’s prospects are poor and their tower is in ruins—although Valeria still seems, despite her impoverished circumstances, to retain her armigette status.

What little else we know about Catherine, however, comes from Ouen, Severian’s father. After Severian seeks him out upon becoming Autarch, he’s told by Ouen of their brief liaison, after which “There was trouble...She’d run off from some order of monials. The law got her, and I never saw her again.” (*Citadel*, 306) This allows us to assume Catherine has been with the Pelerines, as mentioned earlier, and also helps to explain how Severian may have come to the torturers—apparently, he’s brought to Catherine while in their custody.² But look at the one other thing Ouen has to say and which leads into the admissions stated above. Severian, in soliciting information from Ouen about possible bedmates, asks: “A woman you loved—or perhaps only one who loved you—a dark woman—w-

taken once?" To which Ouen replies: "Once, Sieur...Catherine was her name. It was an old-fashioned name, they tell me." (*Citadel*, 306) An odd detail that: the old-fashionedness of her name—especially when, except for Robert and Marie of the jungle hut, all the names of the people we meet are old-fashioned. Can we otherwise relate this attribute to anything or anyone in the Book? Someone, say, with a special adherence to the past?

Part of Valeria's family's antique nature, of course, may be intrinsic to the Atrium of Time which Michael Andre-Driussi, in his fine reference book, *Lexicon Urthus*, describes as "A timeless traveling structure, like the Last House, located in the heart of the Old Citadel." Indeed, when Severian later searches for the Atrium on maps and from the air, he is unable to find it, suggesting it exists either outside or apart from Severian's temporality. As for other possible residents Andre-Driussi speculates the Atrium may indeed house Catherine, and Clute argues similarly. Is it therefore possible that Catherine ("an old-fashioned name") is somehow related to Valeria and her mired-in-the-past heritage,³ and that it's she who emerges from the Atrium every Saint Katharine's day to portray her namesake at the torturer's guild, only to then return to its timeless courts and upend sundials?

Unfortunately, our hopes in this regard are not easy to support. After Valeria tells Severian that none of her blood "carries a sword now against the enemies of the Commonwealth, or stands hostage for us at the Well of Orchids," Severian suggests one of her sisters might be called upon soon to do so. But apparently Valeria is the end of her line, for she says, "I am all the sisters we breed...And all the sons." (Shadow, 45) This seems to preclude Catherine being a blood relative, although it is still interesting to note the various similarities between Valeria and Catherine, from their armigerous status to their dark hair to their connection with more halcyon times. And eventually, of course, Severian takes Valeria as his royal consort once he becomes Autarch.

Avia, Avus

But if you think we're now totally dead-ended in our exploration of Catherine's roots, you're wrong. Because in his sequel, *The Urth of the New Sun*, Gene Wolfe expands on the life histories of Severian and Valeria. She, as Autarchia, has remained behind on Urth while husband Severian has traveled to Yesod, the universe of the Hierogrammates, where he wins the White Fountain, which will bring about the New Sun. Through no fault of his own, Severian's epic journey takes him over four years and routes him through various time loops, such that when he is finally able to return to the Commonwealth he discovers that Valeria is now a much older woman. Moreover, she's also remarried, Severian having been adjudged dead. But all this Severian finds out belatedly, the Urth having by this point flooded over due to tidal havoc wreaked by the White Fountain, and he is himself afloat, on first a raft and then a boat. It's from his fellow survivors that he first hears the startling news. And if this is not already difficult enough to deal with, when he attempts to gain more information about this mysterious second husband, Severian does so by maligning himself, saying "He was a hard man for all I know of him, and a cruel one too, at least by reputation, though perhaps I wouldn't have owned to that. Quite possibly Valeria wed him for his throne, though I believe she sometimes said otherwise. Her second husband made her happy, at least." To which Odilo, a former steward at the House Absolute, adds "Well put, sir. A distinct hit." (*Urth*, 315-316)

Given this, and later boat captain Eata's observation about how, in regards to Valeria and her new husband, "People said their marrying was good," surely it would not be overly speculative to imagine there being a child or children born from this union. Valeria, after all, is the last of her family and has already lost one husband. Apparently as well she and Severian never reproduced (Odilo again: "Or

would have heard of *that*, I imagine.”) It’s also not hard to imagine her being scared about losing Du
Caesidius, her second husband, who must regularly face death in his military dealings with the
Ascians. Given either parent’s demise, a child at least would insure neither line died completely out.

So let us imagine one, a girl, who’s given an old-fashioned name by an old-fashioned mother.
What characteristics might she pass on to a son in her chro-nonautical travails, courtesy of the Atrium
of Time (for surely Valeria would show her daughter the old family stomping grounds)? Wouldn’t
there be some physical vestige of her father in Severian, his grandson? Indeed, this appears to be very
much the case, for as Eata seeks to explain to Severian why Valeria has wed Caesidius, he states
“Some said it was because he looked like you...But he was handsomer, I think, and maybe a little
taller.” (*Urth*, 329) Eata, of course, has no knowledge that time may be contravened, and that the
resemblance of Caesidius to Severian may be due more to simple genetics than latent wish fulfillment
by Valeria. And even Severian himself may remain oblique to his own unique heritage—the
unbeknownst grandson of his own wife, Valeria.⁴

So apparently there are two sides to the Severian family tree, and symmetrical ones at the top
(Severian having slept with both grandmothers). And lest one be too dismissive of Gene Wolfe’s
wickedness or perverse sense of humor in positing such quasi-Oedipal relationships, let us also
remember the world he limns is every bit as wounded as Thebes or the medieval province of the
Fisher King. Though it’s unlikely Severian’s “crimes against nature” are meant to be taken as the
literal cause of the sun’s dying, metaphorically the notion still adds resonance to the overall richness
of Wolfe’s wonder-filled magnum opus.

G & E

Just as certain events in the New Testament are symbolically prefigured in the Old, so too is there
a similar typological correspondence between the events and personages of Dr. Talos’ play
Eschatology and Genesis, and the larger work which contains it.

In this regard, let us now examine how certain passages in each help further elucidate the life and
death of Severian’s mother, Catherine.

In the play’s fourth scene, the exultant character who has previously been introduced to us as the
Contessa has just been granted audience to the Inquisitor. Upon asking him whether Meschia, who
assaulted her in Scene I (*Claw*, 228), has been captured yet, the Inquisitor answers negatively,
whereupon the Contessa relates the following information:

“Scarcely a watch ago some soldiers found me moaning in the garden, where my maid sought
comfort me. Because I feared to be outside by dark, they carried me to my own suite by way of the
gallery called the Road of Air. Do you know it?”

“Well,” responds the Inquisitor. Continues the Contessa:

“Then you know too that it is everywhere overhung with windows, so that all the chambers and
corridors that abut on it may receive the benefit. As we passed by, I saw in one the figure of a man
tall and clean-limbed, wide of shoulder and slender of waist...In a little time, the same figure
appeared in another window—and another. Then I appealed to the soldiers who carried me to fire upon
it. They thought me mad and would not, but the party they sent to take that man returned with empty
hands. Still he looked at me through the windows, and appeared to sway.”

The Inquisitor asks the Contessa if she believes this man is the man who struck her, to which she
replies: “Worse. I fear it was not he, though it resembled him...No, on this strange night, when w

who are the winter-killed stalks of man's old sprouting, find ourselves mixed with next year's seed, fear that he is something more we do not know."

So ends the Contessa's little melodramatic speech. Now for the comparable "real-world" scene which takes place in *Urth*. Severian at this stage has just returned to the world of his birth, emerging via the Brook Madregot, from his own memorial. Entering the Secret House, he begins to look for means to access the House Absolute. Narrates he:

At last I came to an aperture closed by no door; a strong draft from it carried the sound of a woman's weeping, and I halted and stepped through.

I found myself in a loggia, with arches on three sides. The woman's sobs seemed to come from my left; I went to one of the arches and peered out. It overlooked that wide and windy gallery we called the Path of Air—the loggia was one of those constructions that appear merely ornamental though they serve the needs of the Secret House.

Shadows on the marble floor far below me showed that the woman was ringed by half a dozen scarcely visible Praetorians, one of whom supported her by the elbow. At first I could not see her eyes which were bent toward the floor and lost in her raven-dark hair.

Then (I cannot tell by what chance) she glanced up at me. Hers was a lovely face of the complexion called olive and as smoothly oval as an olive, too, with something in it that tore my heart and though it was strange to me, I had the sensation of return once again. I felt that in some lost life I had stood just where I was standing then; and that in that life I had seen her beneath me in just the same way.

She and the shadows of the Praetorians were soon almost out of sight. I shifted from one arch to the next to keep them in view; and she stared back at me, until she was looking over the shoulder of her pale gown when I last glimpsed her. (*Urth*, 293)

Thus, obviously, we have the exact same scene as Dr. Talos' play, only expanded upon and with a change in viewpoint perspective (one of the Book's many recursive loops). But what about the woman Severian actually sees under arrest? Who, in other words, is the Contessa's real-life equivalent, and whatever will become of her when the looming tidal waters of the New Sun soon inundate the Urth?

Physically, of course, with her raven hair and olive complexion, Severian's "Contessa" resembles his mother Catherine rather well. Moreover, since Catherine is Valeria's daughter, we know she's alive during this time period. But in addition to Severian not recognizing her—a trademark character flaw repeatedly seen throughout *New Sun*—there's the following evidence. Though Wolfe only mentions it once, we learn in *Eschatology and Genesis* that the Contessa's name is Carina—a name which like so many others in the quintet, has cryptonymic significance, being derivable from Catherine. (See *Appendix* for details.) Reinforcing this: the homonymic *Karina* is a Scandinavian variant for Katharine. It's therefore enormously difficult for not to see the woman being led by the Praetorians through the Path of Air as Severian's mother.

As for why she's under armed escort, this requires some extrapolation. Certainly, it seems unlikely that Valeria, her own mother, would have her arrested—or at least if she had that Valeria wouldn't mention something in the subsequent throne room scene. But what about the other bearer of power in the post-Severian autarchy—Father Inire? Knowing how close to doom the Urth is, he may well have had her arrested for her own safety—especially if, in her atemporal peregrinations, she had yet to encounter Ouen and become pregnant with Severian and Severa. (Otherwise, her imminent death would be of no consequence.) He subsequently has her ushered to the one locale where she'll be safe from the coming deluge—*approximately seventy years in the past*. Catherine then joins or is married

to join the Pelerines—I favor the latter—perhaps even being placed under a sort of gentle house arrest by the scarlet priestesses’ magna mater (see *Witches*). Eventually, however, she decides to flee the order for reasons unknown; there’s an aside from Winnoc that suggests Catherine may have had abolitionist sentiments and thus she may have aroused the ire of the slave-heavy Pelerine organization, but I think it’s much more likely she simply saw the opportunity to escape and fled. I categorically do not believe that she’s already with child and has therefore been forced to leave because her virgin status has been lost (the Pelerines are chaste by vow)—rather, that she becomes pregnant by Ouen only *after* she makes her escape. This, at least, is implied by Ouen’s aforementioned, “There was trouble...She’d run off from some order of the monials. The law got her and I never saw her again.”⁵ All this, of course, has been predestined—at least from the Hierodule point of view, where our future is their past. Once Severian is conceived, however, Father Inire has Catherine rearrested, but this time brought to the Matachin Tower, where, eventually, in its dark hold she gives birth to Severian and Severa. Once again, in regards to Catherine, the loop doubles back: we start with Urth’s final days, we finish with the Nativity—by any other name, *eschatology and genesis*—the same as Talos’s play.

But what about Catherine’s fate after this point? Apparently, the Hierodules don’t have her executed, but allow her to return annually to see her son during the Feast of Saint Katharine—perhaps as a reward for her eventual cooperation. Given her probable access to the Corridors of Time, she might also even become an itinerant of sorts. This, to me, is at least suggested by author Wolfe, who in Dr. Talos’ play, has the Contessa ask Meschia, “If my body held a part of yours—drops of liquescent tissue locked in my loins.” To which Meschia, who’s portrayed by Severian, replies, “If you did, you might wander the Urth for a long time, a lost thing that could never find its way home” (*Claw*, 218). This, of course, is more Wolfean irony—Thomas Wolfe,⁶ that is—since Severian/Meschia will be semi-present in Catherine’s body as Ouen’s male seed. (GW may also be attempting a hagiographic parallel here: upon her conversion Saint Katharine was mystically wed to the Infant Jesus, gold-ring and all.) On the other hand, since the character Meschia doesn’t mate with Carina in the play, perhaps an alternate fate might be envisioned.

Given that her son eventually goes on to become the previous millennium’s Conciliator, might she not, in her various time-tripping jaunts, wind up back in the Autarchy of Maxentius, where, as her own saintly namesake, she dies on the wheel that now bears her name—a fiery contrivance that in pyrotechnic form is also known to the French as *le soleil*—“the sun?” Or more prosaically does the skeleton that Severian finds at the very end of the Book in the tunnels beneath the Citadel belong to Catherine—unlike the mother of another messiah, there being no ascension to heaven for her, only underground anonymity?

AGIA AND AGILUS

From rather upfront evidence for a work by Gene Wolfe, it's relatively easy to conclude that Dorcas, Severian's waif-like traveling companion and lover, is his resurrected paternal grandmother. Even Severian himself, who can be rather thickheaded at times, figures this out by *New Sun*'s denouement. But what neither he nor many of his readers fully seem to grasp are the circumstances attending Dorcas's brief life as a mother. As Ouen, who is her son and Severian's father, tells Severian during their second meeting, teenage Dorcas has died giving birth. But at the same point it's more than clear from Ouen's testimony that *he* was not the difficult issue responsible. "I never knew her," he tells Severian in response to a question about his mother. "Cas they called her, but she died when I was young. In childbirth, my father said." (*Citadel*, 304) This, however, is a point most veteran readers of the Book fail to grasp: i.e., Cas has not died *giving birth* to Ouen, but rather *when he was young*—i.e., already born. Further evidence for Ouen's primogeniture is also given in *Sword* when Dorcas, who has begun to remember various bits and pieces of her previous existence, relates the following: "I lived with my husband above a little shop, and took care of our child." (*Sword*, 84) The child, of course, must be Ouen. It therefore follows that Dorcas died during the apparently much more difficult delivery of a second child.

But in the grand scheme of *New Sun*, is there a larger relevance to this tragic circumstance? Setting aside the question for the moment, let us instead posit that while Dorcas died giving birth, the child of that delivery did not. Certainly, we're never told anything of this explicitly (which, to be sure, is more like the cagey Wolfe most of us have come to expect). Ouen mentions nothing, and neither does Caron, the old boatman who is Severian's grandfather. Then again, as far as the latter is concerned, he tells us nothing about *any* offspring—only that he and Cas were married for nearly forty years, and ran a shop in Oldgate that sold cloisonné and garments. It therefore seems possible that the second child may well have survived, but Dorcas's husband being unable to nurse it, or perhaps grief-stricken because of his wife's death, either rejects or abandons it, and so it is raised by others. Ouen, however, perhaps because he's older, he keeps, at least until the age of ten when Ouen is sent off to work as a potboy in an inn. If, as Dorcas tells us, she and her husband were together slightly under four years, Ouen could very easily have been born during the last part of their first year together, which would make him about three when she died. This is both consistent with his not remembering her—he's too young to retain memories—but yet being somewhat less dependent on grief-stricken Dad for his day-to-day wherewithal. It also means poor Cas was thirteen or fourteen when Ouen was brought forth into the world. (Agia, post-revival, judges her age to be sixteen or seventeen.)

But allowing for the survival into adulthood of Ouen's brother or sister, what becomes of him or her? Is there anyone in *New Sun* who might correspond to this lost aunt or uncle of Severian's? I believe there is, but before I discuss the individual in depth, let me indulge in an alternate bit of speculation. The tendency to produce twins is genetic, and so, if this person later married and reproduced, it's not unreasonable to assume twins might be born, just as Severian and Severa are Catherine and Ouen. And if these twins were later to enter the same trade as their grandparents, selling garments, although they are used rather than new? By now, I hope you probably will have grasped what I mean to suggest Agia and Agilus are the mystery twins in question—yes, of such fanciful stuff are not only dreams made, but exegetical woolliness. And yet if we can find support for the notion in *New Sun*'s text, who's not to marvel at the deviousness of Gene Wolfe, the Daedalean wordsmith of not only fine prose, but convoluted bloodlines? (In the latter regard Charles Dickens might well be Wolfe

emulatory model. Witness, for example, the secret paternities of Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* or Estella in *Great Expectations*, or the extended family tree of *Oliver Twist*.)¹

Kissing Cousins

I believe there are at least half a dozen areas where support can be marshaled to bolster the argument that Agia and Agilus are the grandchildren of Dorcas and Caron, and first cousins to Severian the Great.

The first involves Agia's saintly namesake. Saint Agia, as Andre-Driussi notes in *Lexicon Urth*, was the mother of Saint Loup. It's long been my contention that many of the names Wolfe gives to Severian and his blood relatives belong in a special category, each having an additional valence relating either to hagio-graphic or auctorial correspondences.² Ouen, for example, is a Welsh form of Eugene; the expired *Saint* Dorcas was resurrected by Saint Peter. And, of course, Loup means wolf—another prime example of author Wolfe intromitting himself cameo-style, if subtextually.³

Agia itself also means saint in Greek—an association we might expect of blood relatives of the New Sun/Conciliator (though *Agia* is no saint).

The second area involves unlawful carnal knowledge. When Severian visits Agilus in his cell, he finds brother and sister Agia both naked together. Later, Agilus seems to confirm his worst fears: “Don't ask me about Agia. Everything you suspect is true—is that enough?” (*Shadow*, 255) This, as I will argue in *Severa*, parallels Severian's own incestuous relationship with his twin sister, as well as his having slept with both grandmothers.

The third area employs symbols: not once, twice or even thrice, but in four separate passages. Wolfe has the sun shining down on either Agia, Agilus, or both, and turning some facet of their features to emblematic gold—*something he does to no other characters in the Book*, but doubtless meant to emphasize their link to the New Sun:

As I watched [Agia], the sun touched a rent just below her waist, turning the skin there to pale gold. (*Claw*, 152)

Flecks of sunlight seemed to turn [Agia's] brown hair to dark gold.⁴ (*Claw*, 193)

There was a tiny window high up in the wall behind [Agia and Agilus], and from it, suddenly, as though the ridge of a roof, or a cloud, had now fallen below the sun, a beam of light came to bathe them both. I looked from one aureate face to the other. (*Claw*, 252)

[Agilus] stared at his hands, slender and rather soft, where they lay in the narrow beam of sunlight that had given his head, and Agia's, an aureole a few moments before. (*Claw*, 255)

The fourth area involves Agia's acquired leg injury. “Now you'll have to carry me if you can,” she tells Severian after their fiacre crash in the Cathedral of the Pelerines. “I don't think my right leg will bear the weight.” (*Claw*, 166) Severian attempts to help, but as they seek to leave the burning temple (and foreshadowing his own injury) we learn the two can “manage nothing better than a limping walk.” Later, once again Severian tells us how “[Agia] was limping, and I recalled how far she had walked today after wrenching her leg.” The context here: as mentioned in *Catherine*, I believe that anyone who limps is related to Severian the Lamé.

The fifth area involves a physical resemblance between Agia and Severian. Agia—whose “long brown eyes” suggest a possible Asian heritage—is repeatedly described as having high cheekbones. Curiously, this is exactly how Cyriaca later describes Severian's hidden facial features at the masquerade.

held by Abdiemus: “You have high cheekbones—their outlines show a trifle through the mask, and your wide flat cheeks will make them look higher.”⁵ To be sure, Cyriaca is *guessing* what Severian looks like beneath his torturer’s mask, but out of all the myriad attributes author Wolfe could pick for Cyriaca to use, why does he choose high cheekbones?

Finally, there are two linked passages in *Citadel*.

In the first of them Severian recalls a statement made by Dorcas: “Sitting in a window...trays and a rood. What would you do, summon up some Erinys to destroy me?”⁶ To which Severian responds:

“Yes. Yes, indeed, I would have if I could. If I had been Hethor, I would have drawn them from some horror behind the world, birds with the heads of hags and the tongues of vipers. At my order they would have threshed the forests like wheat and beaten cities flat with their great wings” (*Citadel*, 19)

Notice how the language and sense of this passage are echoed later when indeed Hethor, birdlike, winged hags snatch Severian from his Ascian captors and carry him back to Vodalus encampment, where vengeful Agia awaits him. “Once I had imagined such creatures threshing the forests of Urth and beating flat her cities,” Severian reminds us. Then wonders: “Had my thoughts helped bring these?” (*Citadel*, 208)

But of course it’s not his thoughts that have summoned the winged hags, it’s his deeds. For both name and physical description these posthistoric Erinys are derived from Classical Mythology being the Erinyes of the Greeks and the Furies of the Romans—remorseless spirits whose special dispensation it is to avenge violent crimes perpetrated against one’s kin. Carnifex Severian, having taken Terminus Est’s sharp edge to his male cousin’s neck, has obviously committed one such violent crime, but like Orestes he too is exonerated by the gods—well, the Hierodules, anyway—and lives to ascend the throne.

Rood Mother

But what about Agia’s missing parent? Who is this lost sibling of Ouen? Well, just as I’ve argued earlier that Caron may be the name of Dorcas’s husband (there being a saint by that name, and Caron recalling Charon, the Greek ferryman of the dead), I’m tempted to call this second child Secunda after the ancient Roman tradition of using numbers to label female offspring (if daughters, Tertia and Quaternia would be the next children in sequence). Appositely, of course, there’s a Saint Secunda,⁷ and she, like Saint Catherine, was beheaded. We’re also told that the garment shop run by Agilus and Agia was bequeathed to them by their mother, while Dorcas, in another one of her recovered memories, remembers shopping for a child’s doll—usually a girl’s toy. But what yet still another recalled memory reveals is Dorcas’s potent association with furniture. Dorcas and Severian are in Thrax at this point. Severian, out touring the city, sees Dorcas watching stevedores unloading boats in the wharf, but when he approaches her she will not speak to him. Only later does he find out why, that Dorcas has seen “An old chair. And a table, and several other things.” (*Sword*, 81) As she then elaborates, “It seems that there is a shop in the Turners’ Street that sells old furniture to the ecclectics...There is no source here to supply the demand, and so two or three times a year the owner and his sons go to Nessus—to the abandoned quarters of the south—and fill their boat.” But more to the point, it seems the salvaged chair has once belonged to Dorcas. As she attempts to explain to Severian, “I knew everything about it—the carving on the legs, and even the pattern in the grain of the arms. So much came back then.” (*Sword*, 82) Dorcas, in short, is realizing that she may be the product of an earlier era (the implications of which are preoccupying her, hence her failure to talk

Severian), but what seems to stick in Severian's mind is her telling him about the looted furniture, twice more before the Book concludes he mentions it⁸—a near extravagant amount given Wolfe's usual parsimonious clues.

Severian himself, however, fails to make any connection between Dorcas's painful recollection and the one other person in *New Sun* who exhibits an odd fascination with furniture—the female prisoner he visits in the Matachin Tower shortly after he returns to Nessus as Autarch. One of thirteen inmates he potentially screens for commutation of sentence, the woman has “stolen children and forced them to serve as articles of furniture in a room she had set aside for the purpose, in one instance nailing the hands of a little girl to the underside of a table so that she became in effect a pedestal.” (*Citadel*, 274) This perversion of the crucifixion not only inverts traditional religious imagery (as indeed does the notion of a “Saint” Agia), but eerily recapitulates another of Dorcas's recalled memories, the already-mentioned “trays and a rood.” (The table is the tray which the nailed girl supports, as well as a grisly cross or rood). The woman's eyes are also clear blue, the same as Dorcas's and Ouen's. Yet despite her outrageous crimes Severian does not believe her to be mad—his diagnosis confirmed by his attempted use of the Claw, which fails to heal the woman, just as it had with Baldanders and Jolenta. The implication we're left with is that the woman has forfeited her connection with humanity;⁹ she's soul-rent, an imago of evil. In essence, as Severian says in the jungle hut, “If it is true that each of us has an anti-polaric brother somewhere, a bright twin if we are dark, a dark twin if we are bright,” then surely the woman I call Secunda,¹⁰ along with her children Agia and Agilus, represent that antipolarity.

“You are wearing a mask.”

When Severian first meets Agilus at his rag shop, Agilus is wearing what Severian describes as a skeleton or death's-head-mask. Severian, however, in the dimness of the shop (Wolfe specifically mentions the lack of light), does not realize this until he sees “a narrow black ribbon that stretched forward a finger's length from the hair above his ears.” (*Shadow*, 154)

“You are wearing a mask,” he tells Agilus, and requests he remove it. Agilus complies, but several paragraphs later, Severian says, “The ribbons that held your mask...They're still there.”

But Agilus neither says nor does anything.

Later, at the Sanguinary Fields, when Severian faces his helmeted Septentrion opponent in monomachy, he makes this observation: “in the shadow behind the cheekpiece I thought I saw a narrow band of black, and tried to recall where I had seen such a thing before.” (*Shadow*, 237)

And then still later, after Severian leaves the arrested Agilus's cell, he notices the following immediately outside, where he's tossed an orichalk to starving Agia: “.the orichalk was gone. In its place..a design had been scratched on the filthy stones. It might have been the snarling face of Jurupa [a demon], or perhaps a map, and it was wreathed with letters I did not know.” (*Shadow*, 255) So what are we to make of these various incidents?

The answer, I believe, can be found in Chapter XX of *Sword*. Severian is working his way down from the mountains where he's rescued his namesake, Little Severian, from both alzabo and zoanthrops. As they enter a high jungle, they find a fetish¹¹ that Severian believes is meant to prevent the coming of the New Sun, while suspended from trees are strips of red cloth written over “with symbols and ideographs of the sort those who pretend to more knowledge than they possess use in imitation of the writing of the astronomers.” (*Sword*, 159) Not much later they're accosted, and Severian comments “.for a moment I thought the figures that stepped into the path were devils, huge

eyed and *striped* with black, white and scarlet; then I saw they were only naked men with painted bodies.” (*Italics mine*) Severian later describes one of these painted faces as “expressionless as a mask.”

Eventually, Severian is made to fight a sorcerer’s duel with Decuman, whereupon, in response to a question by Little Severian about who their captors are, he opines: “I’m only guessing, but I would say this is an academy of magicians—of those cultists who practice what they believe are secret arts. They are supposed to have followers everywhere—though I choose to doubt that—and they are very cruel.” (*Sword*, 173)

Agia and Agilus, I submit, are devotees of the academy cult.¹² This explains the so-called ribbon Agilus wears in his shop and on the Sanguinary Fields—it’s *a stripe* of black paint—while the letters Agia scratches outside her brother’s cell—*the letters Severian does not know*—correspond to the symbols and ideographs Severian sees in the jungle. In fact, if there’s a witch anywhere in Severian’s family, it’s Agia, not Severa, and in many respects she’s like Circe, only instead of turning men into swine, she commands the shape-changing Hethor. (See *Hethor*.) Unfortunately, neither of the twins seems much availed by their use of the dark arts, although at least Agia is not executed like her brother and eventually rises to command Vodalus’s army. What ultimately happens to her, however, is anybody’s guess;¹² perhaps, as Michael Andre-Driussi suggests in his *Lexicon*, she’s meant to represent the Eternal Adversary, the implacable enemy who’s always out there—thus Severian’s guard must never be relaxed.

Pelagia Filia

On the other hand I believe there’s evidence indicating that Agia may have had a daughter. After Severian brings the New Sun, and the Urth is flooded, he takes up with a trio of survivors, first on a makeshift raft, then on Eata’s boat. One of the two women in the trio is named Pega and she claims to have been the servant of the armigette Pelagia. The name Pelagia, however, fairly screams in connection with the Megatherian Great Lords. Agia, being their ally, might well have named her daughter after them (a similar impulse must have motivated the Group of Seventeen). Also, in a slightly different context, there is a relatively famous seaside resort in Crete named Agia Pelagia, the area surrounding which is rife with significant archaeological findings—something Gene Wolfe would almost certainly know.

As for the male parent of Pelagia, who knows? Irrespective of paternity, she may have been held in the House Absolute more as a hostage than a guest, similar to the situation of the exultant concubines. Remember, Severian does not leave to bring back the New Sun until some ten years into his reign and only after he has dealt effectively with the Ascians. By holding Pelagia hostage Severian might therefore be attempting to ensure cousin Agia’s continued pacificity.

Furthermore, it’s possible that Pega and Pelagia are one and the same. Pega, of course, can be derived cryptonymically (see *Appendix*) from Pelagia, and there appears to be quite a bit going on between Odilo and Pega that Wolfe deliberately obscures. E.g., Pega, at one point, says she must have seen the Black Tarantines to which Severian claims he belongs marching in a procession (possibly the funeral procession of Dux Caesidius, who’s died a year earlier): “Odilo murmured. ‘You went with your mistress, I take it?’” “Pega made some response, but I gave it no heed.” (*Urth*, 313) Doubtless this unheeded response contains vital information, but so too I warrant does Odilo’s question. It’s as if he’s taunting her, possibly attempting to trip her up in her own skein of lies (Pega has earlier gone on and on about her usefulness to Pelagia). At any rate, Pega/Pelagia is thrice described as dol-

faced,[13](#) which may link her back to Hethor, who first enters the *New Sun* narrative bemoaning the loss of his paracoital doll, and thus he may be her actual father.

ASCIANS

In *The Citadel of the Autarch*, the concluding volume of Gene Wolfe's *New Sun* quartet, a very strange scene takes place. A battle between the Ascians and the Commonwealth has been raging, but during a temporary lull, however, Severian, our narrator and the novel's protagonist, notes the following:

The savages seemed to have vanished. A new force appeared in their place, on the flank that had now become our front. At first I thought they were cavalry on centaurs, creatures whose pictures I had encountered in the brown book. I could see the heads and shoulders of the riders above the human heads of their mounts, and both appeared to bear arms. When they drew nearer, I saw they were nothing so romantic: merely small men—dwarfs, in fact—upon the shoulders of very tall ones. (*Citadel*, 180)

Only later, as Severian immerses himself in the fray, does he realize the even more bizarre aspect of these ridden tall men: “One of the tall men dashed for-ward...As he drew nearer he slowed, and I saw that his eyes were unfocused, and that he was in fact blind.” (*Citadel*, 181)

Possibly, however, these passages may sound familiar to you in a *déjà lu* kind of way—especially if you've traveled the larger Wolfe universe. Because these blind tall men with their dwarf riders actually first appear in «'A Story,' by John Marsch,» the middle novella of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. John Sandwalker, along with his newly-made allies, the Shadow children, is being stalked by four marshmen at this juncture in the narrative skein. Fortunately, Sandwalker and company are anything but defenseless:

A man loomed in front of him and Sandwalker kicked him expertly, then drove the head down with his hands to meet his knees; he took a step backwards and a Shadow child was on the man's shoulders, his fleshless legs locked around the throat and his fingers plunged into the hair. “Come on,” Sandwalker said urgently, “we have to get away.”

“Why?” The Shadow child sounded calm and happy. “We're winning.” The man he rode, who had been doubled over in agony, straightened up and tried to free himself; the Shadow child's legs tightened, and as Sandwalker watched, the marshman fell to his knees.” (*Fifth Head*, 104)

Somewhat later, then:

The marshman who had dropped to his knees a moment before rose shakily, and guided by the Shadow child on his shoulders staggered away [back toward the pit]...The four men were there, three of them with riders on their shoulders, the fourth moaning and swaying, scrubbing with bloody hands at the bleeding sockets of his eyes. (*Fifth Head*, 104-105)

Given that the Shadow children of *Fifth Head* are pygmy-sized, and the taller, ridden marshmen have been blinded—the same particulars being recapitulated with the tall men cavalry in *Citadel*—is Wolfe trying to tell us something about the Ascians—that, in fact, they're Annese in origin? Surely this is not that subversive an idea; remember, according to Wolfe, the abos of Ste. Anne are actually deracinated Adamic stock, having come to the green world in several earlier migratory waves. Could not, at some future's remove, the Annese, aided and abetted by the reintroduction of spacefarers, make their way back to the mother planet? Indeed, Severian himself claims such returns are quite normal in *The Urth of the New Sun*, as he's traveling from Briah to Yesod. “In ancient times,” says he, “the peoples of Urth journeyed among the suns. [But] many came home at last.” (*Urth*, 73) So it

certainly well within the Wolfean range of idea space that such a repatriation may have taken place. But other than the tall men riders, is there any other evidence for this?

Well, consider the alzabo. Somehow, it manages to make its way from Sainte Anne to Urth (this of course, presupposes that you accept Michael Andre-Dri-ussi's notion about the ghoulish bear of *Fifth Head* being the alzabo).¹ It's possible the Annese may have brought it back with them as zoet transport—imported fauna from home to populate a vivarium and perhaps provide a study or nostalgic base for future generations.

Then there's green Lune. Might not the original impulse behind its forestation be to remind the displaced Annese of their home world? It's also been orbitally shifted, if we're to believe O'Rudesind, who describes a painting of a smaller, grayer moon thusly: "Doesn't seem so big either because it wasn't so close in." (*Shadow*, 52) Again, by moving the moon in to make it appear larger—a faux sister world—could this have been done by the heartsick Annese, pining for Sainte Anne?²

Then there are several passages in *Citadel* that echo either implicitly or explicitly similar passages in *Fifth Head*. Witness, for example, Ava's remark to Severian in the lazaret where she is a Pelerine postulant and he a recovering patient: "Ascians are not human." (*Citadel*, 78) Compare this with the account of Mrs. Blount in *Fifth Head*, who describes the native Annese with similar dispassion: "We called them the abos or the wild people. They weren't really people, you know, just animals shaped like people." (*Fifth Head*, 146) And for something almost directly echoic, consider Dr. Hagsmith's remark about how the abos are "not...really human." (*Fifth Head*, 151)

Meanwhile, back on Urth and still in the thick of battle, Severian apprises us of yet another salient detail:

I think I must have cut down half a dozen Ascians before I saw that they all looked the same—not that they all had the same face, but that the differences between them seemed accidental and trivial...All had large, brilliant, wild eyes, hair clipped nearly to the skull, starved faces, screaming mouths, and prominent teeth. (*Citadel*, 179).

This too has a parallel in *Fifth Head*, where, as we're told by Number Five, because of the small population base, "most of us have a kind of planetary face." How very much like some mad machination of Maitre, whose outsourced Wolfe clones, especially if they're allowed to reproduce, might well come to dominate the Sainte Croix gene pool. Indeed, though the words are the of Autarch's, the following might well summarize the end, if subconscious, result of Maitre's cloning experiments—even more so if they're continued by Number Five and his successors: "They [the Ascians] wish the race to become a single individual...the same, duplicated to the end of number." (*Citadel*, 206) Granted, the Wolfes of Sainte Croix are hardly Annese autochthons (unless, of course, Veil's Hypothesis is true—the central conundrum of the book); but even if refractive, I still maintain the parallels are germane.³

But what about the abos' characteristic lack of manual dexterity? Is there anything in the New Sun books that seems to indicate the Ascians are any less impaired? In my opinion, there is little. From what Severian tells us the Ascian regulars are equipped with energy spears—not exactly weapons that appear to require a great deal of cheiral finesse. And while the dwarf tallriders also utilize bows-and-arrows, if the marshmen of Sainte Anne can weave and deploy fishing nets, it does not seem that big of a stretch to imagine them notching an arrow and pulling back a bowstring (recall as well Victor's expertise with ropes and knots—Dr. Marsch is most impressed with this if we're to believe his diary entries).

Even Severian the Great eventually seems to realize the Ascians are something other than simple

battle foes. At least that's how I interpret his asking Appian, "Who are they?" Or as he elaborates in asking for yet further clarification from the old Autarch, "I asked who they are, sieur. I know they're our enemies, that they live to the north in the hot countries, and that they're said to be enslaved by Erebus. But who are they?"» (*Citadel*, 202) What exactly, however, isn't covered by Severian's précis? Could it be planet of origin?⁴ A not-so-much who are they, but what are they? At any rate he's told by Appian, "Who they are you will discover in due time," although we never hear Severian disclose any such result within the *New Sun* narrative frame. (And yet we're led to believe he does spend a year with them later, although Wolfe has never fleshed out the episode; perhaps if or when he does, we'll learn more details.)⁵

But if indeed the answer to Severian's triply-asked question is that the Ascians are the abos of Sainte Anne, let's consider the delicious irony of this. In classical mythology, because they live in the torrid zone, the Ascians have no meridian shadow twice yearly (Ascian actually means 'without shadow'). If we accept the notion that shadow represents soul—a popular motif in fairy tales—and that having souls makes us uniquely human,⁶ it seems possible to connect the shadowlessness of the Ascians with their enslavement to Erebus, one of Urth's alien great monsters. Having apparently returned to their mother world in some glory (imagine the resources needed to terraform and shift the moon), for whatever reasons, the Annese/Ascians have chosen to cast their lots with megatheria Erebus, a being named after the underworld darkness beneath Hades through which all the dead must pass. In other words, now soulless, the former Shadow children have gone apenumbral, becoming in a completely different sense, well, yes, *shades*—and by so doing forfeit both humanity and future.

But then in many respects this is also what *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* is about: a descent through various levels of darkness, and ending in self-abnegation.

For surely, repatriated to Urth, but mocked by forested green Lune in the skies above them, this is where the Shadow children and their brethren have wound up—enslaved by an alien overseer, condemned to speak in stock phrases, shadowless in the dying, sun-impoverished inferno of home. In which case Severian's year-long sojourn among them might well represent not so much diplomatic niceties, but the harrowing of Hell itself.

DOMNICELLAE

Who is the Domnicellae, the high priestess of the Pelerines that Severian meets only once, the encounter taking place in the tent cathedral after he and Agia have crashed into and destroyed the altar of the Claw? Her name is never given (usually with Wolfe a sign we're meant to figure it out), and when Severian later convalesces in the lazaret of the Pelerines, she's conspicuously absent—simply “away,” as Mannea, mistress of the postulants, tells us, with no reason given for her nonpresence. Does author Wolfe provide us with any clues as to whom she may really be?

I believe he does and suggest she's Thecla's childhood friend, Domnina, whose tale we first hear from Severian in the Jungle Garden. For starters there's her name, which can be extracted from the letters of Domnicellae; as I argue elsewhere and especially in the Appendix Wolfe uses this device over and over in the *Book of the New Sun*, where names are either nested inside larger names derived via near anagrams from the parent word.¹ In addition, the witchy priestess has the stature of an exultant, the class to which we know Domnina belongs. And as for her being absent from the field hospital of the Pelerines, this is Wolfe cheating a bit; Severian, having incorporated Thecla's memories via the alzado, would no doubt recognize her old childhood friend, and so Wolfe very conveniently has her missing. Finally then, we have young Domnina's experience with the numinous—a fish of light caught in the mirrors of Father Inire—about as potent a Christian symbol as you could hope for,² but also calling to mind Severian's eventual turn as the piscine Sleeper, the Oannes-like god of Ushas. The encounter apparently disturbs young Domnina quite a bit³ and doubtless leads her to reevaluate her situation, nudging her toward a life spent among the Pelerines (almost certainly with some encouragement from Father Inire, whose favor she holds), and eventually culminating in her rise to the rank of Domnicellae.

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