

## The True Rank of Gene Wolfe

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Gene Wolfe has received many acclamations. A few critics, including science fiction author Michael Swanwick have called him the greatest living writer in the English literature. I respectfully disagree. Wolfe is not at all the greatest writer in science fantasy or in English fiction—he is one of the greatest writers our planet has ever produced.

It can be shown, in the strictest literary and technical terms, in matching his work against criteria for judging significance in literature, that the general corralling of GW's output into the science fantasy genre is a colossal **underestimation**. The measure of recognition awarded him is like identifying Albert Einstein as the best known examiner of the Swiss patent office, or Shakespeare as the best English dramatist of 16th century England.

I aim to support this conviction and to demonstrate how and why GW is among the most eminent writers of all times. There is personal bias in this, but I will also show, notably in the section *Contrasts*, that Wolfe's art possesses qualities that are outside of personal judgments, and that their elegance is as undeniable as the elegance and precision of a geometry. Comparisons will be made between Wolfe and other writers, most often Henry James and Marcel Proust, who are considered to stand at the acumen of literary art. In all sincerity, I make no absolute judgments on these authors; that would be meaningless because readers fall into classes with their particular and equally valid tastes and standards. The criticisms or parallels here are made only in comparisons to Gene Wolfe's work.

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3. How to facilitate placing GW with the worlds the greatest of authors

### **Part B. The elements of Wolfe's fiction** (page 11)

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### **Part C. The use of the element of contrast in Wolfe's work** (= a separate file)

The main section of this essay deals with the use of the technical tool of **contrasts** taken to amazing heights by Wolfe.

### **Part D. Academia and Gene Wolfe** (= a separate file)

#### **An apologia**

I would like to apologize ahead for endless repetition of superlatives; synonyms for

"beauty", "mastery", "elegance" are not numerous in English and are soundly overused in the mirk of publicity blurbs, but what can one do when speaking of superlative things?

## **Part A. The status of Gene Wolfe as a writer**

### **1. The sci-fi/fantasy designation - the genre classification**

Most writers can easily be classified by genre. Gene Wolfe is too prolifically creative and original to be so labeled. He is the master of any style and any subject. As perfectly as he writes sci-fi and fantasy, he is equally skillful at realism, epic, mystery, drama, legend, the Biblical, metaphysics, mystery. Some of his novels cover one category, others combine several. His short stories are a treasure house of imaginative and philosophically profound adventures in reading.

His versatility is that of a Mozart or of a Leonardo. Why call him a science fiction-fantasy writer? Would we call Kafka or Shakespeare famous authors of fantasy? There are the witches in Macbeth, the fairy tale creatures in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is the ghost in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the Devil in Goethe's *Faust*, angels and the devil in Milton, gods and Cyclopes in Homer? True, Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* (abbreviated as *TBONS*) which is the work chiefly discussed in this essay, takes place in a fictional world, but this can be understood, as in Kafka and the others, as the freedom and basis of artistic interpretation, a projection of human conditions into other times and places.

On the other hand, the fiction of the highly regarded Jorge Luis Borges is admitted to be fantasy, but because his output has an obvious academic flavor and extends to poetry, drama, essays, criticism and formal lectures, he is academically recognized as well. But then GW has also written essays and poetry and has lectured. Above all, the prose of Borges, for all his excellence, hardly reaches the level of Wolfe's. There are several possible explanations for the bias against GW, and they are discussed in the section *The Hack-a-demics*. One thing may be apparent: there is little action in Borges, or in Proust or James and even in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* the plot centers on a single incident of murder. Henry James himself speaks (and deserves credit for it) in his *Notebook I* about the lack of physical events in *POAL*: "The weakness of the whole story is that it is too exclusively psychological—that it depends too little on incident...". (This quote also in *Hack-a-demics*). Yet the book receives top academic rating, and it can be concluded that Academia prefers inaction to action in fiction. It is easy to understand why reduction of incident adds to the academic value of a work. The more words the more to talk about, the more words to be reinterpreted.

Wolfe's people often wield swords, swords are not pulled in Academia, after Shakespeare, anyway, although daggers are all right, when used in backstabbing. So Wolfe is out—active behaviors, so much parts of the classics such as *The Bible*, *Homer*, *Beowulf*, *Shakespeare* are no longer allowed by the rules of Academia. There are strange circumstances in Borges and there is also limited action within short episodes, but he has no novels. Wolfe in a way could be said to have taken elements like Borges's and Kafka's, and adding them to his own, had recast them as colorful and vivid novels. His has thus amplified and constructed out of similar sources something germane to what Borges or Kafka could have done as a novelist. Had Borges produced historical-fantasy novels, besides his academic papers, would he then be locked into the same box with Wolfe? Probably not, after all he had upper bourgeois background, had lived in foreign countries and was for a time directed the Argentine national library and a university academic. Wolfe is middle middle class, has worked as an engineer, lives in a small Midwestern town, and has no academic position. Had Wolfe come from the same social network...(you can fill the rest).

Why should the lives and pretensions of upper middle people in salons and in vacation places as elaborated by Henry James or Marcel Proust be best related to the average human reader? A setting with idle conversationalists is no less a play with ideas and words than one erected in a fascinating place and time, where persons not only speak but engage in actions in more ways than those exchanging clever repartees and doing nothing alternately in London, Paris, Florence, Rome, and of course, Venice?

Judging we like to read is a matter of personal taste, and that is ultimately tied to what degree a person's mind is verbal or visual, social or philosophical in its image and pattern formations in the mind. Verbal types would enjoy reading lengthy conversations, the interest of visual minds would be in visual elements. Writers differ in having varying proportions in mental tendencies. Certain people, therefore value the monologues and conversations of Proust or James and would find little attraction in science fiction and fantasy where unusual people and places, building, movement and physical action accounts for a large part of a story. The multi-page passages in Proust's possibly reflect his personality. Lydia Davis, in the Introduction to her translation of *Swann's Way*, Viking 2003, although considering this as hearsay, cites a friend of the Proust's saying that the writer would come to his apartment in the late evening and begin to talk without stop.

It is held that the classics present characters with whom readers can readily identify, and therefore have the greatest relevance to shared human experience. Coupled with this is the argument that an author who is describing his or her own time and place understands those most accurately. Thus, the literary value of fantasy is demoted. However, authors of science fiction and fantasy equally model their characters and narratives after their own world, since their minds are necessarily colored by their own background. The only difference is that they place the actors in novel scenarios. They cannot do anything else but show how the universals of humanity manifest in those places and times. To a reader in the future our fantasy would be a record of what early 21st centurians considered fantasy.

## 2. Meeting the qualifications of great literature

As mentioned, it is not easy to define what constitutes greatness in literature because many its factors overlap with personal reader's taste and interest. The academic opinion lists the main requirements as a) relevance to the human condition, b) relevance to readers in all times, c) outstanding writing and style.

**2a.** As for **relevance** to human concerns no one can argue that Wolfe's work does not spring from the profoundest problems in life. He speaks about the individual deepest thoughts and his relationships, he paints a portrait of the world, he explores good and evil, life and death, the nature of divinity, and of being and time. Had he turned to non-fiction, he would be among the profoundest of philosophers. Does Joseph Conrad's search for "fidelity", or values in morality, or Henry James' portrayal of a woman's errors in judgment deal with humanity at a higher level? In quotations (*k*) and (*m*) in the section *Beauty of Prose* below, Wolfe expresses notions about time and existence, and about the generally unnoticed quality of divinity in our lives.

**2b.** As for universal values that ensure that a work remain meaningful at **all times**: Wolfe certainly does not place his stories only in some sci-fi future, his narratives generously span the past, present and future. Sometimes we cannot even be certain precisely what era is depicted in his stories, take for example the short story *Peritonitis* or *Alphabet*.?? That he creates portraits and landscapes with an assortment of individuals, races, cultures, religions, history and institutions rather than a small cast of loquacious individuals, as in Henry James', upper

bourgeois settings does not in any way subordinate his work. GW's *Peace* and similar works deal with the present and only a handful of ordinary people, whereas he writes about ancient Egypt and Greece in the *Latro* series and introduces a great collection of people. *The Knight* and *The Wizard*, *Pirate Freedom*, and *There Are Doors* start in the present and then take off to odd places and times. The future is the scenery for *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, and the *New, Long* and *Short Sun* series. Did versatility ever disqualify a genius?

**2c.** The brilliance and the grip, the novelty and ingenuity of Wolfe's **stories and prose coupled** with his remarkable artistic and technical skills have received considerable acclamation by the relatively small body of his readers. They are captivated not only by what he says but what he does not, something especially important in judging the greatness of a work. Among other things, *TBONS* especially has captured the attention of readers by its mystifying ambiguities of personal identities. Who Severian is, his destiny, his family relationship to other characters has been widely debated.

There is little need to prove that GW **story telling** powers are first class. His fiction is immensely fascinating and complex, and it contains a wealth of elements, be that epic, romance, adventure, people, personal relations, suspense, mystery, surprises, puzzles, philosophy, religion, society, nature, past and future, technology, poetry, drama. Again, is opulence of ideas not a property of great literature?

His **technical skills** offer much material for discussion. Readers, for example, can most easily discern and appreciate the following elements in *TBONS*:

1. The prodigiously colorful assignation of **names** and appellations are not only perfectly fitted to the characterization of persons, animals, objects or places, but at the same time, serve to integrate the parts in the tightly interconnected technical structure of the work. For instance, turning to references for the names of characters in *TBONS*, one discovers that the majority are the names of Catholic saints, and this immediately suggests that they bind together the whole story with some deeper thematic ties. See *Names* below. Paralleling this, the names of characters in *The Book of the Long Sun (TBOLS)* and in *The Book of the Short Sun (TBOSS)* originate from those of plants and animals and from a miscellany of different lands and times. *TBONS* is greatly enriched by the colorful **archaic words** that GW unobtrusively assigns to things and beings. These words nearly always need to be looked up in a dictionary, but that act is, rather than a chore a pleasant source of small discoveries in allusions and etymological connections. The cadence of these archaisms is the jewel-like ornament of GW's prose.

2. The perfectly unified **structural** construction in Wolfe's work, one less open to casual reading—the *tour de force* performed without any apparent effort—is the sign of a genius. The device of **contrasts**, one of the most essential components of art and life at large, used as a device of story organization is examined in Section C.

An interesting structural device in Wolfe's work is his creation of stories connected to a particular novel. *The Cat* and *The Map* relate to the world of *TBONS*, and present characters that Severian has known. *The Map* features with Eata, as an adult, who in *TBONS* had been a fellow apprentice of Severian's, and the narrator in *The Cat* is the son of the seneschal of the Autarch whom Severian has met in the palace. Moreover, the story tells the reasons for the unjust imprisonment of an older man Severian meets in the Antechamber. This interconnection between distinct works is framework built by Wolfe the engineer.

3. Wolfe's uncanny mastery and variety in story telling is further enhanced by the immense **beauty** of his **prose**. His level art, which has received recognition by too few so far is, and which is documented below in more detail in **Part B** alone suffices to place him at the highest ranks of all writers.

#### **2d. A great author is recognized for his or her unique style, special color and tone**

The general tone in GW's work, most especially *TBONS* can be called symphonic, as if it literally contained all sounds. Its unity is in its opposites: it is somber yet lively, happy yet sad, it can depict violence yet in a strange somber and gentle way. An underlying color flows through the paragraphs in which one feels courage, kindness, understanding, tolerance, quiet optimism, calmness and solemnity. We find the peers of its prose and imagery among writers of the stature of Blake and Shakespeare. It is time that this be recognized.

It has been stated by .... that Shakespeare was a better stylist the Wolfe. This needs a qualification. To compare the style of a dramatist to that of a novelist does not seem feasible. And unfortunately, "stylist" simply means one who has a distinctive, recognizable style. We cannot say Shakespeare's style is more typical of Shakespeare than Wolfe's is typical of Wolfe. There are many authors with impressive and individual styles. But not to recognize Wolfe's style to be as powerful and unmistakable as Shakespeare's would be a sad occurrence. Please see the section *The eloquence of Gene Wolfe*, below.

Important fiction is expected to be more than prose. GW's language is more indeed, it is literature married to the visual arts and to music. The design and materials in his work match the classicism of Leonardo, Bach, Mozart, the humanism of Rembrandt, the darkness of Goya and Piranesi, the brilliance of Van Gogh, the freshness of Cezanne, the heroism of Beethoven, the nightmares of Kafka, the eloquence of Shakespeare, the fire of Blake, the mystery of Poe, the romance of William Hudson, the ingenuity of Escher, and as many of the best we care to apply.

Wolfe's competence in a great many styles is well established. In *Endangered Species*, collection of some of his earlier short stories *In the Neighborhood of David Copperfield* is perfectly Dickensian in its language, *The House of Gingerbread* is satirical fantasy, *The Map* has a style similar, but not identical with that of *TBONS*, *Eyebem* gives a realistic account in the words of a melancholy and naive young robot. The *Soldier* books are colorful historical narratives. The novel *Peace* is told in the words of a man in a small American Midwestern town. And the list goes on...

We can look at passage that perfectly exemplifies Wolfe's style, taken from *TBONS*, *The Sword of the Lictor*, chapter 4, p.26. First though, the typical prize-winning author, or I, who can't write at all, would word it this way: "The guard told me I had a visitor and that I should change my clothes. From the way he said this I concluded that the visitor must be the governor. I quickly passed through my office and reached my room from where I ran the business of the prison. There I put on my black cloak and wondered why the governor, who had never before come to see me and whom, in fact, I had never seen him outside the courthouse would visit me alone without his attendants." This is typical prose.

Wolfe's version: " 'You have company,' the sentry told me, and when I only nodded to acknowledge the information, he added, 'It might be best for you to change first, Lictor.' I did not need to ask who my guest was, only the presence of the archon would have drawn that tone from him."

"It was not difficult to reach my private quarters without passing through the study where I conducted the business of the Vincula and kept its accounts. I spent the time it took to divest

myself of my borrowed jelab and put on my fuligin cloak in speculating as to why the archon, who had never come to me before, and who, for that matter, I had seldom even seen outside his court, should find it necessary to visit the Vincula—so far as I could see, without an entourage."

This small and uneventful scene lives because like the rest of the novel its beautifully carved sentences bring on a continuous sense of unhurried majesty. The significance of Severian's observation is only understood much later, at the last two sentences in the chapter 7. Rediscovering such seemingly innocuous clues planted early in the narrative is what makes reading Wolfe's work such rich experience.

Now for one sample of the depth of psychological portrayal Henry James reaches in his prose:

" 'Ah well, said Isabel, standing before her uncle with her hands clasped about the belt of her black dress and looking up and down the lawn—'that will suit me perfectly!' "

## **2e. The potential for many rereadings**

People have reported reading Wolfe's novels several times. His work partakes of the quality of great art. It can be looked at, heard, or read not just once, and each time one discovers new things not noticed before. This is a gift children naturally have: they find fascination hearing or reading by the same story or rhyme again and again. A classic is has the same power on adults.

## **3. To get GW to where he justly belongs**

GW should be called something other than a science fantasy writer. He has produced in various genres and styles not only in SF and fantasy, and we can find in it all elements, be that conversational, social, mystery, psychological, philosophical, adventure, science fiction, fantasy, history, romance. Since few other authors have covered that much and so well his fiction is entitled to be given a special appellation.

**Chart A** displays the major literary genres, which of course, naturally overlap. Novels considered great come from only five classes. Fantasy enters only if allegorical, as a subclass of the other four. Examples: a) the conversationals, socials and psychologicals: James, Proust, Conrad, Mann, Tolstoy; b) societal: Sinclair, Solzhenitsin, Zola?, Balzac?, c) psychological: Dostoyevsky; d) phsychological, philosophical and fantasy: Kafka; e) philosophical and fantasy: Hesse; f) adventure and psychology: Melville's; g) romance: Hudson. *Please see Chart A.*

GW, on the other hand, can be, doubtless recognized by readers familiar with both standard literature and science fiction and fantasy, as the master combiner of all the genres displayed. So far he has shared the fate of J. S. Bach: as a performer on the organ and harpsichord he was considered a star by his contemporaries, but his compositions were left in the dust till revived in the 19th century. Today, he is recognized as one of four or five greatest musical geniuses whose work is a monumental summation of all traditions of music known in his time.

Similarly, the content and coverage of GW's work is far beyond mere science fantasy; his summation of genres appears some great production, at one time a stage drama, an epic, a grand opera, a ballet, a movie, stories, actors, music, singers, dancers, chorus, costumes, light, scenery, curtains, intermissions...

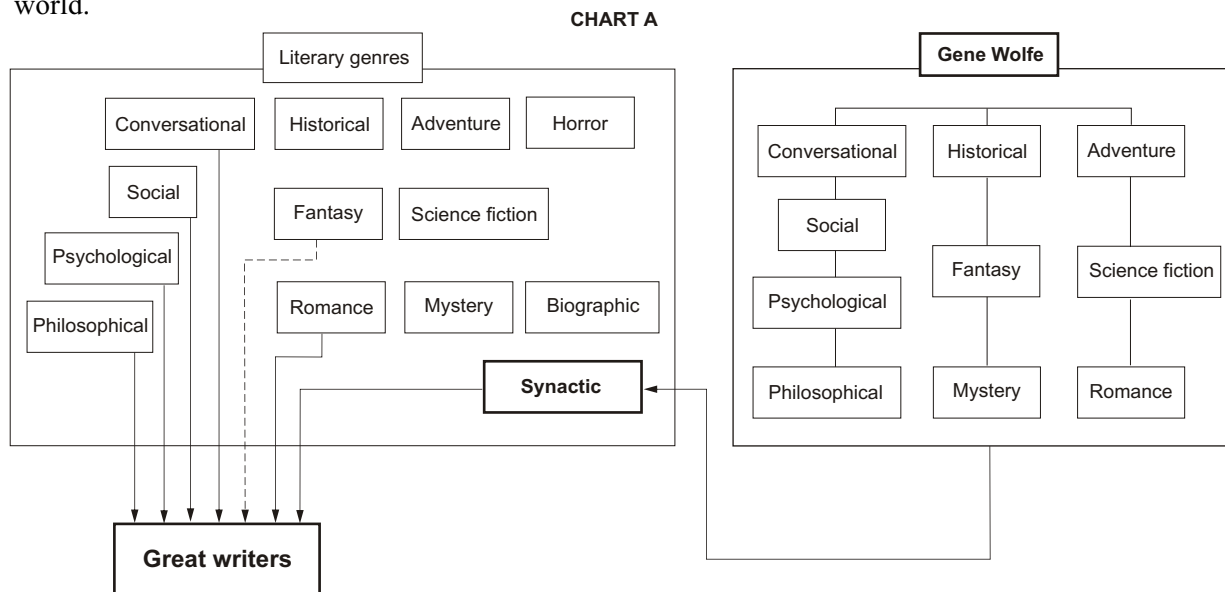
Words have power. It is an old saying that once we have the word "nothing", nothing becomes "something". Commercial and political propaganda fuels economies and rules millions. Some may remember the "Pet Stone" gimmick from the 1970's when an ordinary pebble boxed and given a name sold millions, or the "compassionate conservative" slogan of the USA elections of



the early 2000's. Once it has a name any nonsense acquires existence in the public mind. Likewise, when a thing has no name, it has no place in which to exist. This is what necessitates the reclassification of Gene Wolfe's work. We as yet have no suitable label.

A solution may be suggested by the fact that we live in a culture where hordes of new names for products and the internet come to light daily. Those who recognize Wolfe's worth only have to invent a new term, a new niche for him. Since he merges so many elements into one, his novels can be regarded as "omni-comprehensive", "pantoramic", "absolute", "symphonic", "consummate", "sympoetic", that is "creating together", from Greek "syn" + "poein", "to make". "Synthetic" has too many other connotations. "Synoptic", or "seeing (everything) together" might serve too, as well as "holoplasmic", one that "molds together all things". The simplest term might be "**synactic**", from the Greek "synaktikos" or "able to bring together". It is well documented that once a term is seen a number of times and it becomes an everyday word.

No other author, it seems, fits such an appellation except Wolfe, but a class with only one member is still a class. And once the idea of **synactic** novel is added to literary genres, Gene Wolfe, the first author of that class can conveniently take his place among greatest writers of the world.



### Internet surveys of best science fiction novels

Many surveys of readers' choice of the 100 best sci-fi novels appear on the Internet. Two that readily come up are: [http://home.austarnet.com.au/petersykes/topscifi/lists\\_books\\_rank1.html](http://home.austarnet.com.au/petersykes/topscifi/lists_books_rank1.html) and <http://www.listology.com/list/david-pringles-best-100-science-fiction-novels> /David Pringle's Best 100 Science Fiction Novels /Submitted by kbuxton on Tue, 02/20/2001 - 10:00

The Australian site gives only one GWs book, TSOTT, ranked 67th. At the same time Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*, is placed third, just one ahead of *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. The appearance of the latter, a juvenile brainless trifle in a list of the best sci-fi novels immediately instructs us to disregard the listing. The second list, from a more serious source includes two GW books, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* at 67th and *TBONS* at 95th rank. Here again, if *The Space Merchants* by Frederick Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth, which, though certainly entertaining, is only an adventure story, yet comes in as no. 12, this survey is not something to take seriously, at least with regard to its placement of Gene Wolfe. Well, at least

Adams was taken out.

There is something missing in these surveys. The population sample is not identified. Who knows how many responders are in their teens, or whether they have developed tastes for judging sci-fi or more basically, literary quality. Different samplings would give different results. For instance, if each responder would submit their personal listing of the best sci-fi books, and their second best was *TBONS*, and those submissions were averaged, that masterpiece would sit much higher, yet would appear only as the 95th when only the favorite books are surveyed. And ultimately, according to the law of normal distribution, such surveys still yield nothing more than the **average** opinions. Is it not true that James or Conrad or Mann or Proust are also not read by the majority?

Another factor is book availability. Books of the highest quality, that are not necessarily fully understood at first are read by fewer people than books that are considerably more straightforward. Publishers print less copies of the former and once those go out of print younger readers would be quite unaware of their existence. This might explain the sad fact that two greats of science fiction, Jack Vance and James Tiptree, Jr. are not even mentioned in these listings.

Of course, not that all are blind to **GW's stature**. We read that Thomas Disch identified Isaac Asimov and Gene Wolfe, respectively, as the "most overrated" and "most underrated" authors. He adds: "all too many (sf writers) have already gone into a decline after carrying home some trophies. The one exception is Gene Wolfe...Between 1980 and 1982 he published *The Book of the New Sun*, a tetralogy of couth, intelligence, and suavity that is also written in VistaVision with Dolby Sound." (<http://www.worldswithoutend.com/author.asp?ID=158>) I could not agree more fully. (Asimov, although he is the truly rare genius who can successfully explain science, wrote prose fiction at the level of a high schooler.

Lis was a fabrication of his own mind says: "It was in this instant of confusion that I realized for the first time that I am in some degree insane...I had lied often to Master Gurloes and Master Palaemon...and (also) to apprentices because I hoped to make them respect me". Liars and the insane do not admit to themselves that they lie and that they are insane, only the honest and the sane do. Only the rational can recognize their own irrationalities. This motive of unreliability was pursued in Neil Gaiman's words to the grand master: "Not only can you lie in fiction, but I think Gene is the master of lying in fiction, both directly and indirectly. Peace is built on lies. And assume that, being who he is, Gene is pretty damn sure what the truth and what the lies are in Peace. The rest of us have to get through that as best we can. After three or four times through that text, you begin to be able to say, 'I think he's lying about this or that.'" To this statement, which might seem quite out of place if coming from any one but a close friend, Wolfe's expectedly courteous although short reply was: "I never lie". (<http://www.locusmag.com/2002/Issue09/GaimanWolfe.html>).

With regard to this favorite internet reviewer's topic of the "unreliable narrator" GW has commented: "Real people really are unreliable narrators all the time, even if they try to be reliable narrators." The author of the article adds "Sometimes this is a person who is simply nave ('Pandora by Holly Hollander', 'The Knight'), or is not particularly intelligent ('There Are Doors') or is not always truthful ('The Book of the New Sun'), or is suffering from serious illness (Latro in 'Soldier of the Mist', who forgets everything within 24 hours). (<http://www.worldswithoutend.com/author.asp?ID=158>) Still, until examples are presented I cannot take judgments on Severian's veracity seriously. People say and believe many things just because they heard them. Why would roughly half the population of the USA vote in politicians who maintain successful careers by ripping them off?



The decline in the standards of science fiction writing and in its readership has been lamented by Brian Aldiss in an article on his trilogy *Helliconia: How and Why* and by others, including Gene Wolfe in a more polite manner typical for him. But that is simply a result of growth. The more of something the less its value, the more people try something the lower the average quality of results fall. I heard it reported as early as 1989 that there 10,000 women composers in New York state. An example: In *TBONS* the designation "Ascian", or Greek for "without shadow", is a very skillfully chosen term, refers to people of the tropical zone, where in the hours of the noon the shadows are extremely foreshortened. Wolfe says in the interview with Larry McCaffery (<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/wolfe46interview.htm>) that "nineteenths my readers and reviewers would look at the word "Ascian" and say, "Oh, these guys are Asians!" This confusion got me accused of being an anti Asian racist..." Once these readers learn to spell or to check references they might get past discussing nothing beyond the plots.

Perhaps a different face of this same situation is revealed in Wolfe's answer when asked by Jeremy L.C. Jones, in a 2009 interview, whether he likes to teach writing: "Yes, I enjoy teaching writing. (Unfortunately, most students don't enjoy having me teach them.)" Remarkably like first graders disregarding instructions in reading and writing. And to argue with a grand master of literature is impertinence. Elements, that is, subjects and motives GW has incorporated in *TBONS*. It is useful to show parts of a text as discrete quotes: when one reads it is the story line that is primary and only secondary attention may be paid to style. Pulled from the narrative they appear more like works of art on a velvet cushion, under a spot lights in a museum.

### **The Prince and the Pauper**

The novel *The Prince and the Pauper* by Mark Twain is about two identical looking boys, Edward the English crown prince, and Tom Canty the beggar boy who exchange places and start new lives under circumstances totally alien to them. The standard interpretation of the work, considered a social satire, is that it describes the inhumanity of English justice in the time of Henry the Eight while also relating the confusions and problems the two boys experience. Mark Twain, a master of humor, was a shrewd and critical man unhesitating to point at the imperfections in the world. An important societal imperfection may be evident in the way the paupers now surrounding Edward ridicule the claims of his identity. There is a replication here. It is Wolfe's work, not he himself, of course, that proclaims his true identity, but even his fans regard him as the best writer merely of science fantasy of the last century.

Others without less feeling for art publish reviews that summarize the plots and tender immature evaluations on the personalities of Wolfe's characters. In one otherwise informative internet review Severian is cited a "compulsive talker", possessing a "repulsive trait"; *TBONS* is said to contain "picaresque plots" of "flamboyant nature". To express a personal appraisal is the genuine right of anyone but it can sometimes resemble the mentality of the beggars of Mark Twain's novel. Let's not think like 16th century paupers.

### **Humor**

Humor in *TBONS* is often in the situations. For example, there is Severian's perception of 20th Century airplane in the Jungle Hut episode; he sees it as an odd flying contraption with shiny bulbs on the wings.

Speaking in person Wolfe is openly humorous. A sample, which I personally especially

appreciate, is instanced when James B. Jordan in his interview asks Wolfe: "Where would you say it [love] lies in the novel [*TBONS*]? GW answers: "I think that the true ideal of love for any person is God. It isn't another human being. If my wife were here she would be deeply offended by that." As much as this remark touches a humorous aspect of married life, in a more serious vein it brings to mind the bond nature has created between man and woman in biological and even cosmic terms, as Shiva and Shakti or Yin and Yang, and it could also stand for Wolfe's conviction that love of one's wife may be so deep that it is only second to loving God.

A charming comic scene adorns the otherwise melancholy short story *Eyebem*. Here two robots pretending to be humans, with whom they do not generally mix, sit in a little store also pretending to be drinking sodas. The lady owner knows they are not human, but does not mind their presence because humans bring in business when they come in to stare at the robots. Eyebem reminisces: "...the woman, with what I realize now was the most elephantine tact, contrived to turn her back so that we could pour (our drinks) ...into a conveniently placed spittoon." This appears straight from W. C. Fields.

The name "Eyebem", of the protagonist in the short story *Eyebem*, can be surmised with certainty to come from "IBM" because it is revealed that the robots in his world are called after important cybernetic companies of the past. But this spelling is ingenious because its real identity is kept from being obvious at first glance and even later ones. Thus "Eyebem" becomes a little verbal gem: it recaptures the naivité of the character as it is spelled not quite correctly as if by a child in first grade.

### **A postscript to *Humor***

My kindly wife has given me a copy of Wolfe's *Castle of Days* and now I can see that Gene Wolfe has fooled me. Some of his stories are light-hearted, but in general the novels are serious and even solemn. But this book exposes the "real" Wolfe, out of his sheep's clothing: this author is fabulously funny person—in addition! "*Vunce around der Mamma's Kitchen*", purportedly by Hans Katzenjammer can make one roll under the table with laughter. Other pieces, like *The Writer's Toolkit* or *A Few Points About Knife Throwing* are likewise extremely funny. Had he gone into writing satire Wolfe would be another Mark Twain or a James Thurber; he could be a money-making star of writing comedy. In the same book we also find a nice case of iconoclasm: Wolfe has characters from *TBONS* tell jokes. However, in many places in the *Castle of Days* Wolfe shows a different tone of humor, one on par with the sarcasm of a Samuel Johnson or any other great master of satire. For instance, in *An Article About Hunting* in this collection he offers a biting description of human incompetence and cruelty to animals. That this perspective on the world surfaces in only certain of his works only underscores the Wolfe's enormous literary talents. But then, there is a great range of appreciation for humor. For instance, a popular radio comedy that has been playing weekly for several decades now, to me is funny in that it is impossible to predict which jokes will or will not make the audience roar. "It was a rainy Monday morning and I poured myself a cup of coffee" might bring loads of laughter, but "It was a rainy Monday morning and poured myself a cup tea" might pass in silence.

## **Part B. The elements of Wolfe's fiction**

A good novel must have the proper density, a concentration of subjects or **elements** in good proportions and dimensions. The story, characters, relationships, motives, prose should be sufficiently complicated, but only to a point. Writers assign greater proportion to elements that suit their particular genres. Adventure or mysteries focus on events; socio-psychological ones (like Conrad, Proust or James) concentrate on monologues and dialogues. Works in any of the arts are most masterful when they take a small subject, follow rigid rules, and from that create interesting, elegant and novel works. In *TBONS*, where he gives us an entire society, to maintain proper density, GW wonderfully unifies, always in meaningful relationships, the fate of the hero with other persons of various walks of life, ages and social standing, with different worlds, with the interrelations of levels of society and with philosophies. A novel with such breadth of the coverage is thus rich, yet the elements are well balanced and only enlarge one's experience in reading it. Aside from this technicality, just as any person, each writer has a flavor, a particular personal key in his or her work, and this is perhaps the strongest of qualities deciding whether a reader values an author. Fans of Cyberpunk SF or of Conrad and Mann or Tolkien or GW are unlikely to trade books. We can briefly list below some of the collection of elements, that is, subjects and motives GW has incorporated in *TBONS*. It is useful to show parts of a text as discrete quotes: when one reads it is the story line that is primary and only secondary attention may be paid to style. Pulled from the narrative they appear more like works of art on a velvet cushion, under a spot light in a museum.

### **1. Waiting**

The act or state of waiting is a basic animal and human behavior. As a biological function it occurs in a predator's patient ambush, or in more removed situations in human life, where it carries boredom, uncertainty, suspense, hope, fear, or fulfillment, and so on. Some of these characteristics of **waiting** are among the most important elements in Kafka's *Trial* and *Castle*, or in Melville's *Moby Dick*. In *TBONS* this state appears in the scene with Valeria and her family who are waiting for generations in their Atrium of Time for departure to the stars, or the tragic hopelessness of those imprisoned in the Antechamber, or the old boatman who has been searching for the body of his wife most of his life, or among the victims consigned to the torturers, like the young noble woman Thecla alternately believing in and then losing hope in her eventual pardon and release. GW may have inserted these images as an allusion to lengthy waiting in the religious sense for resurrection, or release from purgatory or hell.

### **2. Contrasts**

Contrasts and contradictions are the essence of any story or work of art, be that novel, play, poem, music or painting. The sonnet, perhaps the most elegant of traditional poetic forms, is an exercise in expressing a notion for 14 stanzas, and then finishing with a surprising contradiction in the last stanza. GW in so many of his paragraphs presents us with abbreviated prose sonnets of great beauty. The technical and narrative use of contrasts is especially marked in GW's work and is the subject of **section C. Contrasts**. He places antitheses in parallel pairings, in ambiguities and in event structure in a way so remarkably engineered that the design readily lends itself to a graphic, **diagrammatic** representation. See *section C*. These are not simple flow charts, but components put together as if parts of a mechanical machinery. Wolfe's mind, even without his training and earlier profession in engineering is behind the ability to construct systematic unity

from complexity.

He works with many opposites: life and death; pleasure and pain; kindness and cruelty; poor and rich; innocence and treachery; oaths kept and broken; nobles and commoners; father and son; family and individual; children with parents and orphans; humans and aliens; humans and animals; humans and robots, and so on.

### 3. Women and men

*TBONS* presents a broad canvas that combines the subtlety, reality and psychological complexity in the personalities of men, women, children, and non-humans. These can be nobles and commoners, masters, servants, craftsmen, curators, the strange doctor Dr. Talos; giants, mermaids, undines, the chemically altered (Jolenta), the technologically altered (Jonas), the guild masters, the mysterious Father Inire, criminals, and others are all found in Wolfe.

Women are a prime example: Wolfe's definitely one of the few men who understand women—as much as that is possible—and his appreciation of them is perfectly clear. He is a connoisseur of women, as he is of men and children, too. Where James' *POAL* deals out a small handful of social stereotypes, Wolfe's gives us a collection of carefully drawn ordinary as well as unusual and captivating women, of varying in looks, ages and temperaments. He had not neglected to include even Amazons in the *Latro's* Greek adventures.

A quote from *The Citadel, TBONS, Ch3 p 216* conveys the sense of how Severian (and standing behind him, Gene Wolfe) cherishes and elevates special feminine beauty: "Her name was Valeria, and I think she was younger than I, although she seems older. She had dark, curling hair, like Thecle, but her eyes were dark too. Thecla's were violet. She had the finest skin I had ever seen, like rich milk mixed with the juice pomegranates and strawberries."

"But I didn't set out to talk about Valeria, but about Dorcas. Dorcas is lovely, too, though she is very thin, almost like a child. Her face is a peri's [a fairy's] and her complexion is flecked with freckles like bits of gold. Her hair was long before she cut it; she always wore flowers there."

In the *Sword of the Lictor*, chapter 5, p 38, Cyriaca, an older noble woman is described by Severian: "No years had marked her smooth, sensuous face, but the candle of youth that burned so brightly still in Dorcas, and had shed its clear, unworldly light in about Jolenta, that had shone so hard and bright behind Thecla's strength and had lit the mist-shrouded paths of the necropolis when her sister Thea took Vodalus' pistol at the grave side, had in her been extinguished so long that not even the perfume of its flame remained. I pitied her."

What wonderful sentences and images! So much is told in this brief but poignant portrait of Cyriaca, and not only of her, but informative even of other persons! A stunning juxtaposition of the bright flame of youth, of a sinister unwordliness, the darkness of a grave site at night, the remaining odor of a flame put out, and expression of deep sympathy! Did Gibbon or Proust construct more perfect lines and is there any more eloquence in the Psalms of David?

Men who are Wolfe's main protagonists are as gracefully depicted as the women, whether they human or robotic persons. Severian, *Latro*, *Weer* in *Peace*, *K.* in *There Are Doors* and all the men in the treasury of Wolfe's works are very different characters characterized in the most skillful ways. Much can be said about them and there is no need here to go into that. We may mention *Eyebem*, the sadly humorous short story told from the perspective of a young and naive robot who recounts many "childhood" memories while telling of his first "adult" assignment, that also turns out to be his last. Even in this well-meaning non-human Wolfe has brought out an unexpected human feelings of warmth and youthful naiveté.

A reviewer at <http://www.challengingdestiny.com/review/newsun.htm> has considers *The*

*Shadow of the Torturer* "constrained" because most of the story takes place in the city of Nessus. K. in Kafka's *The Trial* also proceeds within one city, as so many novels do. This reviewer also describes Severian as a "compulsive talker" because he does not explain the plot when it is not clear. If Severian, who in fact, is narrating the entire four volume story, is considered excessively verbal, then what would they call Henry James and Proust, and for that matter, any writer? The same review reads: "As Severian puts in the fifth book, he has a persistent desire for women's flesh. In other words, he's constantly having sex. Fine, except that he's also the world's biggest jerk...I have nothing against an author picking a repulsive trait as a marker for a character." This reviewer might consider that going the hero trudge through a whole tetralogy plus a sequel consorting ever-so faithfully accompanied by a single mate would make unusual literature. Further, aside from understanding the nobility of Severian's personality, it can be argued that Severian is a hero figure, and heroes, take for instance Hercules and gods; had Zeus not played around with a coterie of divine and mortal women? This is also the norm in human society, when a particular culture allows it. The rulers of most early and not so early civilizations possessed harems. Going back further, among canids, felines, ungulates and primates there are numerous species where a single alpha male tends a group of females.

But there is a kinder way to see it. In all of his affairs Severian feels sincere love for each woman and this is an indication perhaps of a universal love that he fundamentally has for most living creatures and even things. Having escaped from the Antechamber he speaks of at last finding his lost sword, *Terminus Est*: "I reached around the jamb of the broken door, and—with an indescribable mingling of triumph and familiarity—felt my hand close upon the beloved hilt. I was a whole man again...then drew the shining blade, wiped it, oiled it, and wiped it again, testing the edges with finger and thumb as I walked along." (*The Claw of the Conciliator*, Chapter 20).

The series of romances in Severian's journey mirror his personal development through the story. Each one is also a unique and artful psychological and physical depiction of both players and their interactions. Going through this series is not unlike reviewing a line of vivid portraits on the walls of a museum. These pictures project GW's image of the world, as he sees it as a connoisseur of persons and personalities. It also offers a contrast to Henry James' literary mode. He devotes over five hundred pages to describing of the mind and disappointment of young Isabel Archer.

Moreover, Severian is a hero figure. Gods and heroes of mythology typically have a number adventures with the opposite sex. The escapades of Zeus are well known. Herakles spent fifty nights each with a different one of the fifty daughters of King Thespius. The "immaculate perception" motive is thought to go back to the same folkloric source. The Greek and Roman churches celebrate a mystery in the Feast of Assumption: "The Virgin Mary is taken up into the bridal chamber of heaven, / where the King of Kings sits on his starry throne." This all goes back to our ancestral biological program for social interaction. Social cohesion needs hierarchy with its authority figures and then rank brings privileges.

#### **4. Good and evil persons**

The young exultants (of high nobility) in Antechamber episode who entertain themselves by torturing prisoners in the dark are among the few persons purely evil in *TBONS*. Eusebia, the false accuser of the innocent Morwenna is another one. Others engage in less than benevolent actions only because, like the masters and students of the torturers' guild, as often explained by Severian, they are bound by honor and traditions to perform those in the most charitable way possible. Then there are those, like the odd Dr. Talos, who seems at the same time both somewhat evil and somewhat kind. The ape-men, and even the alzado are neither good or bad because they simply follow their natural dictates. GW has said that no person is entirely evil and in his stories



few really are.

No one is whitewashed, Severian himself is, at least by training, a torturer, and for a while earns his living as an executioner. Superimposed over this, however, is his genuine compassion and kindness, seen over and over throughout the story. Having a chance to slay Agia, his nemesis, who stands with her back towards him, awaiting the strike of the swords, he quietly walks away.

As to Wolfe's own personal kindness to others, the undertone in all his work I can think of at least one piece of evidence: I was always rather disappointed when looking at run-of-the-mill fiction by his fellow authors he generously praises in many of his interviews.

### **5. Children**

The study of childhood, the time of personality shaping and deep impressionability is an important science since it is the root and the first-born of our minds, which never leaves, but is covered over, and it is the source of what we later become. Gene Wolfe's deep understanding and sympathy reaches not only adults, but the young and the old and he faithfully reproduces the charm of children and the love they can engender in us. We read accounts and memories of the childhood of the protagonist of first novella in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, in *TBONS* of Severian's and Dorcas', we meet the little girl in the Antechamber, pieces emerge from the childhood memories of Thecla, there is the suddenly orphaned little Severian. The warrior of *The Knight* and *The Wizard* is actually a child, and remains so even after magically transformed into a powerful adult. The extensive body of Wolfe's short stories are remarkable for their frequent choice of children as their subjects.

### **6. The old**

The important role of the old receives special emphasis. They most often appear as the benevolent and experienced masters of various guilds and professions. There are the masters Severian's own training, the mysterious Father Inire, the old picture cleaner, the librarian, and many more. This is quite unlike the current, and let us hope, perishable trend in mass media and mass publishing which ranks youth above age.

### **7. Social ranks**

Wolfe gives us in *TBONS* an account of the social structure of Urth: the poor and the rich, the noble and the commoner, the trade masters, the servants, etc. Sympathy pervades whether dealing with male or female, young or old, human or not. Many examples can be cited: the false Thecla, who is a poor woman working as the prostitute in the House Azure, or the tragically romantic noble woman Cyriaca, the old boatman in the Botanic Garden, the maimed dog Triskele, Valeria in the House of Atrium, the captive Green Man, the ape man in the cave—it is hard to count. As Wolfe says in *Castle of Days*, he wrote *TBONS*, in part, to build and describe a complete society, with a variety of cultures in which humanity spread across a large globe, and even into space would doubtless exhibit.

### **8. Vocabulary**

GW is well noted for his employ of a rich store of archaic words with which he creates prose of a particular richness in color and variety. Like the curators, librarians or masters of various trades, he values and puts to good employment old things like antique words and with them achieves giving an impression of Urth as both very new and very old. This special vocabulary strongly affects reading, it always fits the scene perfectly and unobtrusively and fills it with wide ranging allusions. Freshly coined words still have acoustic and psychological impact, whereas the sound of words we are habituated to are barely noticed.



The few reviewers who have expressed a distaste for the archaic words in *TBONS*, may simply be like those insensitive to painting by a master, but who readily recognize the Coca Cola bottle or Marilyn Monroe in the multiple prints of the Andy Warhole studio. Opportunists always associate themselves with the well known. Tastes may be not be arguable, but there are limits.

To look at an example of such words in *TBONS*: in the conclusion of the episode with the ape-men hidden assassins attempt to shoot Severian. He reports seeing "**quarrels**" hitting the rock faces around him. Whereas one may at first imagine that this in some ways describes the confrontations between metal projectiles and stone, it is entertaining to find that GW has (innocently) substituted for bullets an old English form of "quarters", apparently common in the world of Urth, referring to a projectile with a particular squarish shape.

Michael Andre-Driussi's *Lexicon Urth* undertakes to define all the archaisms in TBNS. Here we can just list a few: autarch, archon, optimate, chiliarch, chateleine, armiger, hipparch, epopt, exultant, tribadist, algophilist, peltats, destrier, quarrels, Algedonic Quarter, quillons, pelerines. Others not really archaic include: cacogens, notules, baluchither.

### 9. Places, landscapes, buildings

Depictions of the spatial and temporal become exquisite paintings in GW's hands. Pictures of palaces, buildings, rooms, corridors, parks, caves, gardens, huts, tents, mountains and forests are all rendered in the most concise and esthetically perfect manner. They are of a different magnitude when compared to Henry James' visual clichés such as one about a very typical English bourgeois homestead in the *Portrait of a Lady (POAL)*: "A long gabled front of red brick, with the complexion of which time and the weather had played all sorts of pictorial tricks, only, however, to improve and refine it, presented to the lawn its patches of ivy, its clustered chimneys, its windows smothered in creepers". This says very little in too many words and is appears pretentiously petty in its insignificance when we read something as concise yet abundant as the following:

Book 2, Chapter 8, p. 46:

"I was already on the same side of the river as the jacal I had visited that afternoon and had no need to take boat again; but the streets were strange to me and in the dark seemed almost a labyrinth built to confound me. I made several false starts before I found the narrow way I wanted, leading up the cliff.

The dwellings to either side of it, which had stood silent while they waited for the mighty wall of stone opposite them to rise and cover the sun, were murmurous with voices now, and a few windows glowed with the light of grease lamps. While Abdiesus reveled in his palace below, the humble folk of the high cliff celebrated too, with a gaiety that differed from his chiefly in that it was less riotous. I heard the sounds of love as I passed, just as I had heard them in his garden after leaving Cyriaca for the last time, and the voices of men and women in quiet talk, and bantering too, here as there. The palace garden had been scented by its flowers, and its air was washed by its own fountains and by the great fountain of cold Acis, which rushed by just outside. Here those odors were no more; but a breeze stirred among the jacals and caves with their stoppered mouths, bringing sometimes the stench of ordure, and sometimes the aroma of brewing tea or some humble stew, and sometimes only the clean air of the mountains."

*Note:* so much is given with so few words: the personification of the wall, the contrasts between the aristocrats and the poor, between sights, sounds and odors. This is the highest poetry—even better than poetry because it has no rhyme and rhythm to limit its gorgeously flowing phrases—any more comment on it is an anticlimax. This is the glowing verse of a Dylan Thomas. If Henry James is great what is Wolfe? Gene Wolfe ranked 67th among the best 100?

These are jokes, at best.

### 10. The eloquence of Gene Wolfe's prose

The internet site *Wikiquotes*, which features eighteen some memorable paragraphs of Wolfe clearly pays justice to his stature as a prose writer. Nearly every paragraph in *TBONS* can be the envy of writers. One of the *Wiki* quotes is the vivid and striking sentence "His eyes were yellow and held a certain clean madness". But is only the poignant concluding sentence of a particularly masterful paragraph. In this scene Severian, has saved a injured fighting dog with a missing a leg, thrown out to die, and is stitching its wounds. Here is the full text, with some unexpected associations with natural history and death: "Triskele licked my hand from time to time as I worked, and when I had made the last stitch began to slowly licking that, as if he were a bear and could lick a new leg into shape. His jaws were as big as an arctother's and his canines as long as my index finger but his gums were white; there was no more strength in those jaws now than in a skeleton's hands. His eyes were yellow and held a certain clean madness."

*Note:* These are remarkable mixtures: "clean" and "madness"! The weakness of a skeleton; vicious canines in healthy white gums, a dog behaving like a bear! Yellow eyes are typical of dogs, but what is the madness in Triskele's eyes? Is it the inbred violence of fighting dogs, and why "clean"? Because this dog, capable of great violence, is fundamentally not culpable for the nature it inherited? Because Gene Wolfe believes, as he has said, that there is some good in everyone? And then a little puzzle: what is an arctother? If we check, that is the name of a large prehistoric bear but arctotheres are living animals in Severian's world. Wolfe's epilogue states that *TBONS* is a translation of the book written by Severian, and English terms are often only the best approximations.

**The following examples** all taken from *The Shadow of the Torturer* (Book One of *TBONS*) can be added to those in the Wikiquote and still only represent but a fraction of the body of eloquence which that single volume contains. Citing any more from the other three novels of *TBONS* or from other writings of Wolfe would make no more sense than counting pebbles on a beach. It would be interesting if those having the means would present in a blind test any of these quotations to eminent literary critics and ask them to judge the quality of prose and to identify the author. They might be embarrassed finding out that this enormously outstanding writer has so far been relegated to the science fantasy column and has been totally ignored in academic circles. They may gain something of value: a new mine of topics for another myriad of theses and articles, a fresh window in the stale pseudo-analysis of relationships between Shakespeare and Mann and Proust and James and Dostoyevsky and Sartre and Joyce...

**a.** Severian's observation of the man in the hut in the jungle:

"I felt that he knew we had come (and even if he had not seen us a few moments before, he must certainly have felt the hut shake when we climbed the ladder, but that he wished to pretend he did not. There is something in the line of the back when a man turns so as not to see, and it was evident in his". (Chapter 22, p. 130 of *TBONS* / All chapter and page numbers refer to *The Book of the New Sun*, a two volume edition by TOR, 2000).

*Note:* A splendid understanding of behavior expressed here in words spoken of artful brevity!

**b.** Severian recounts how he was told by Valeria, the young noble woman that she and her family has lived for generations forgotten in their tower, from which, for ages now, none had been called to courtly functions or to fight for the autarch:

' "Perhaps one of your sisters will be summoned soon", I said, for I did not want, for some reason, I did not want her go herself.

"I am all the sisters we breed," she answered, "And all the sons.'" (*Shadow*, chapter 4, p. 34).

*Note:* Uncanny elegance in this circumlocution by Valeria—like a declamation on the stage of the highest drama!

**c.** Severian, imprisoned in the Antechamber gives an account of the lives of those living there:

"In that way we talked for as long time, if I were to write it all here, there would be no end to this history. In that room there is nothing to do but talk and play a few simple games, and the prisoners do those things until all the savor has gone out of them, and they are left like gristle a starving man has chewed all day." Chapter 15, p. 298).

*Note:* this is an incredibly brilliant metaphor!

**d.** Vodalus, the high noble speaking to Severian about two powers opposing each other, designating one as white and the other black:

"I called it black by chance, but it would be well to remember that it is by night that we see the stars strongly; they are remote and all but invisible in the red light of day." (Ch 10 p270) *Note:* What a novel image from an age where the sun that is growing dark!

**e.** Severian bemusing his upcoming first performance as executioner:

"Tomorrow would be my first appearance on the scaffold, unless the chiliarch decided at the last moment to exercise clemency. That was always a possibility, always a risk. History shows that every age has some unquestioned neurosis, and Master Palaemon has taught me that clemency is ours, a way of saying that one less one is more than nothing, that since human law need not be self-consistent, justice need not be so either." (Chapter 30, p. 182) *Note:* What an intelligent analytic comment on nature of human society!

**f.** Severian's words as he prepares to behead Agia, who is bravely expecting the fruit of her treachery: "Can I stand with my back to you, Severian? If it's all the same, I don't want to see it coming".

When she said that, I felt as though weight had been lifted from my heart: I had not been certain I could strike her if I had to look into her face.

I raised my own iron phallus, and as I did so felt there was one more thing I wanted to ask Agia; but I could not recall what it might be.

"Strike," she said. "I am ready."

I sought good footing, and my fingers found the woman's head at one end of the guard, the head that marked the female edge.

And a little later, "Strike!"

But by that time I had climbed out of the vale." (Chap 000 p 000

*Note:* What Severian meant to say remains a puzzle and it only increases the psychological polish of the text. Perhaps it is the expression of the genuine love he had at one time felt for Agia, and a sense that it had not altogether perished. The final sentence is a paragon of literary economy.

**g.** GW is not an armchair philosopher: with an imagination such as his it is possible to feel, to a degree, what an executioner may experience. Serving in the Korean war he had occasion to hold in his rifle sight another human being. In *The Sword and the Citadel*, (Book 2 of *TBONS*),

Chapter 1, p. 208 he paints a war scene where Severian comes on the body of a dead soldier and eats the food in his pack and reads the unsent letter, which starts with "O my beloved..."

*Note:* Again, Wolfe is possibly speaking from experience. Severian utters no ceremonious comments, Wolfe unobtrusively conveys the tragedy of the moment.

**h.** Severian's words to the khaibit [prostitute] offered as an impersonation of Thecla and her reply:

"You are not the Chatelaine Thecla,' I said. "What am doing here with you?"

There was surely more in my voice than I intended. She turned to face me, the thin cloth of her gown sliding away from her breasts. I saw fear flicker across her face as though directed by a mirror..." (Chapter 9, p 65)

*Note:* Genuine sympathy for the less privileged comes across here coupled with a beautifully expressed subtle emotional event.

**i.** Severian with Agia in the Garden of Sleep; he thinks she is not truthful about the length of time they had spent there:

"Now you are lying to me.'

For an instant I saw a flash of anger in her face. Then it was spread over with an unction of philosophical irony, the secretion of her injured self-esteem. I was stronger than she, and poor though I was, richer; she told herself now (I felt I could almost hear her voice whispering in her own ear) that by accepting such insults she mastered me."

*Note:* compare this brief and subtle analysis of Agia's mind, offered in but two lines to the endless prosaic declamations by Henry James in "exploring" the psychological motivations of his character Isabel in TPOL:

"It may be **affirmed without delay** that Isabel was probably very **liable to the sin of self-esteem**; she often surveyed with complacency the field of her own nature; she was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right; she treated herself to occasions of homage." This continues for about two full pages when printed on an 8 1/2 x 11 page.

**j.** Severian, searching for his dog has lost his way in a strange part of the Torturers' Citadel and climbs up on a pedestal of a sun dial:

"The space about it had been a garden in the summer, but not such a one as our necropolis, with half-wild trees and rolling, meadowed lawns. Roses had blossomed here in kraters set upon a tessellated pavement. Statues of beasts stood with their backs to the four walls of the court, eyes turned to watch the canted dial: hulking barylambdas; arcotheres, the monarchs of bears; glyptodons; smilodons with fangs like glaives. All were dusted now with snow. I looked for TRiskele's tracks, but he had not come here." (Chapter 4, p. 33)

*Note:* this could be the verbal description of a painting; it is filled with pictorial details and an aura Proust with his tea and cookie would delight in recalling. The description of once colorfully alive objects now lightly covered with snow exactly recreates what in traditional oil painting is called a glaze, where a thin veil of a particular color is spread over the entire canvas, giving the entire picture a subtle tint of red, blue or yellow.

**k.** Severian and Dorcas walking in Thrax the night before his first professional engagement as an executioner:

"Dorcas had found a daisy for her hair; but as we walked outside the walls (I wrapped in my cloak, so that to anyone more than a few paces off it must have seemed that she walked alone), it folded its petals in sleep, and she plucked instead one of those white trumpet shaped blossoms

that are called moonflowers because they appear green in the moon's green light. Neither of us had much to say other than that we would be utterly alone save for the other. Our hands spoke of that clasping each other tightly." (Chapter 30, p 180)

*Note:* there is truly tasteful and sincere eloquence in this concise expression of emotions and circumstances. Here is great romance distilled into three sentences. And then there is Severian's executioner's cloak covering him, so black that it makes him invisible in the night: this is an extra, a poetic contrast added as an aside: death, or Severian walking by the side of life, or Dorcas with her daisy.

**l.** Severian, dreaming is asked by his Master Malrubius:

"Of what kind, Severian, is your own attachment to the Divine Entity?"

I said nothing. It may have been that I was thinking; but if so, my mind was too much filled with sleep to be conscious of its thought. Instead, I became profoundly aware of my physical surroundings. The sky above my face in all its grandeur seemed to have been made solely for my benefit, and to be presented for my inspection now. I lay upon the ground as upon a woman, and the very air that surrounded me seemed a thing as admirable as crystal and as fluid as wine." (Chapter 33, p. 198.)

*Note:* this expression of this profound personal union with apparent reality, often referred to as the "oceanic experience" is usually ascribed to some hallucinogenic state, but it is also known as the state of being with God in Judeo-Christinity and Islam, and in the Asian religions, to see reality, the light behind the illusionary world. This is but one of the philosophically profound statements Wolfe places into his work.

A similar one can be found in chapter 31 of the Claw of the Conciliator, (*Book 3 of TBONS*), p. 409: (After Jolenta, the artificially beautified woman has died, Severian comments that her face) "had been washed clean of beauty. In the final reckoning there is only love, only that divinity. That we are capable only of being what we are remains our unforgivable sin."

*Note:* The meaning of this is not clear to me, but I know that understanding it needs more reflection on my part, not Wolfe's.

**m.** Severian is on his first walk with the attractive, though poor Agia:

"Agia's face was far from perfect now in the clear sunshine, but she had nothing to fear from it. My hunger fed at least as ravenously upon her imperfections. She possessed the hopeful, hopeless courage of the poor, which is perhaps the most appealing of all human qualities; and I rejoiced in the flaws that made her more real to me." (Chapter 29, p. 119)

*Note:* We often hear about the beauty of David's Psalms. They may be so, especially in the context of the era they were written in, still standing next to Wolfe's magisterially melancholic lines they are corny, antiquated clichés.

**n.** Merryn, the young acolyte of the Cumean sibyl speaks:

"All time exists. That is truth beyond the legends the epopts tell. If the future did not exist now, how could we journey toward it? If the past does not exist still, how could we leave it behind us? In sleep the mind is encircled by its time, which is why we so often hear the voices of the dead there, and receive intelligence of things to come. Those who, like Mother, have learned to enter the same state while walking live surrounded by their own lives, even as the Abraxas perceives all of time as an eternal instant." (Volume 1, Chapter 31, p 405)

*Note:* This is a profound portrayal of time, something that is really undefinable (except by the

Big Bangers) spoken not by a science fantasy author but by a philosopher of the eminence who happens to put down his ideas as fiction. He entertains and so teaches, his is not the muddled verbiage of academic philosophers. Gene Wolfe uses only a few words: time exists as an undivided whole, and is analytically broken, recorded and replayed by the waking mind, as that can do no better. To experience time as a whole is to become everything, divinity itself. The eminent physicist David Bohm expressed the same in his analogy of holograms, wherein every part contains the whole. And if that is not enough, that is also the message of the Great Buddha. It should be admitted that in an interview by Larry McCaffery GW contradicts Merryn's statement that all time exists and he says that only the present exists: "Memory is all we have. The present is a knife's edge, and the future doesn't really exist (that's why SF writers can set all these strange stories there, because it's no place, it hasn't come into being). So memory's ability to reconnect us with the past, or some version of the past, is all we have." ([http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/wolfe46\\_interview.htm](http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/wolfe46_interview.htm))

I will leave off analyzing and comparing the two views for now because the topic has many interpretations as it depends on language, which has difficulty working with things beyond its scope. In any case, GW has said interviewed by David de Beer in 2008: "My great theme is memory. I'm rarely aware of that as I write, but I realize it as I read." ([http://www.nebulaawards.com/index.php/interview/gene\\_wolfe/](http://www.nebulaawards.com/index.php/interview/gene_wolfe/))

o. Severian beholds an unusual and large structure on a tower shape like a lens: "The misty light of the moon, the younger sister's kiss upon the face of her dying sister shone on the upper surface of that huge disk." (*Sword of the Lictor* (Book 2 of *TBONS*, vol. 2 Ch 32 p 172)

*Note:* This single sentence, personifying the two celestial bodies as sisters, recounts in a most hauntingly tender way how the moon's light, diminished as the sun is cooling, falls on the earth.

## 11. The chapter titles

**The naming of chapters** reveals another of Wolfe's skills. The words and phrases of poetry and drama that head the episodes, (in alphabetical order here) gift the reader with variety, excitement, suspense, promise, invitation, premonition, beauty, expectation and mystery:

The Antechamber,  
 The Assassins.  
 The Attack on the Hierodules  
 The Badger Again  
 The Bouquet  
 The Bourne  
 The Cleansing  
 The Conversation  
 The Cultellarii  
 Dr. Talos' Play: Eschatology and Genesis  
 Five Legs  
 Fool's Fire  
 The Herdsmen  
 The House Azure



Hydromancy  
 The Inn of Lost Lovers  
 Jolenta  
 The Last Years  
 The Lictor of Trax  
 The Liege of Leaves  
 The Man in the Dark  
 The Master of Curators  
 Mirrors  
 The Odalisque of Abaia  
 The Picture-Cleaner and Others  
 The Rag Shop  
 Resurrection and Death  
 Salamander  
 Sennet  
 The Showman's Tent  
 The Tale of the Student and his Son  
 The Traitress  
 The Traitor

It is a challenge to find parallels in literature for such a mesh of connectivities and suggestions carried in the language and words of these titles. In the case of Conrad or Proust or Henry James, (though not Melville), who simply number their chapters, one may receive a different sense, not of generosity toward the reader, but a bleakness in visual imagination.

### 12. Terrestrial vs. subterranean

Settings above and below ground are favorite tools of contrast for Wolfe. In *TBONS* we learn that the House Absolute, the immense palace of the autarch is totally subterranean: this emperor of the world and all his powers reside underground. In a more literal sense this brings to mind that the fauna and flora underneath the soil are crucial links in the chain of life, or that gravity ever pulling us downward regulates all our motions. Important events take place in the Antechamber and the maze of thousands of corridors that are all below within the House Absolute. The apemen are met and fought by Severian inside a cave.

The memorable episode of the short story *Tracking Song* takes place in an empty and bleak subterranean city. There metal frames of warehouses, housing silent machines, stand without walls amid crisscrossing thoroughfares devoid of life and become part of the stirringly beautiful image when the protagonist suddenly comes upon streets lined with long festive rows of colorful flowers—made of brittle glass!

### 13. Terrestrial and aquatic

Wolfe's stories assign important roles to water and worlds under water. Ordinarily this might simply serve as a varied setting for action, but in his fiction these elements always carry deeper connections to religion and myth. One is made to think of the many meanings water carries: the evolution of life, the salty sea in our blood, the sacred qualities of water, purity or decay, danger and escape, etc. The collection of aquatic beings and landscapes in Wolfe's fiction constitute a whole different world. Water that is nearly conscious is the subject of *Solaris*, the classic science fiction novel of Stanislaw Lem. In *TBONS* the word *nenuphar*, as "translated" by Wolfe for the

plant mentioned by Severian, in our world stands for the great white water lily of Europe, the *Nymphaea alba*, appears twice and in both cases Severian nearly drowns. Possibly Wolfe was thinking of the lotus, *Nelumbo*, similar to Nenufar due to evolutionary convergence, it is today thought, was considered a sacred plant in ancient times, mainly in Egypt and still is in Buddhism. It symbolizes a passage through three worlds, land, water and air because its deep roots anchor in the mud, its stalks rise through the water and its flower floats on the surface. The Botanic Garden episode discussed *Part 3. Contrasts, q.v.* specifically deals with GW's use of the dual nature ascribable to water.

#### **14. Change of body form (biological and technological):**

Examples of such changes occur in *TBONS* with Jonas and Jolenta, a pair with "j" initials, both of whom fade away—the one-time waitress turned glamorous dying, the injured mechanical man leaving Urth towards rebirth. The motive of biological alchemy appears in *TBONS*, in Dr. Talos' activities. In *Peace*: we meet the druggist and his wife, in *Soldier of Sidon* as Sabra, the vampirical Egyptian woman made of wax), in *TFHOCerberus* as the grandfather whose brain lives in a robot, and as the aunt with a mechanized body. The memories of Thecla living in Severian's mind and the alzabo's absorption of information from the brains of his devoured prey share this theme, although not as changes in body form, but as minds engulfed in new bodies. The person of a child lives in an adult in *The Knight* and its sequel. Changes in gender also happen, as in *Soldier in the Mist*, where Eurykles the necromancer somehow changes to become Drakaina, a woman. Where else?? FIX

#### **15. Ambiguities**

The well-known Wolfean trademark of ambivalence already surfaces in his earlier masterpiece, *TFHOCerberus*, where the ambiguity of the identity of the protagonist is the underlying theme connecting the three seemingly discrete novellas.

This problem of identities remains a major topic in internet discussions however it is more than a trick for the mystification and entertainment of readers. GW is underlining a reminder of the fundamental uncertainty of existence itself. The philosopher-mathematician Descartes (who was, though rarely mentioned, also an enthusiastic vivisectionist, one who truly enjoyed and recommended cutting up animals alive) is famous for positing doubt for all that resides in mind, coming up with the mistaken idea that he existed because he possessed thought. His famous sentence in Latin is too commonplace for us to even quote. Existence has no basis we can understand. Why is one born a particular person? Why not an animal? Where are we, where is the Earth, where and what is the universe, why is it here, where did it come from, why is there anything rather than nothing? Do we really know anything, and what is "knowing"? Metaphysics infuses all of Wolfe's work with such.

Apart from such large uncertainties, the characters and narrative are bound up with smaller questions. Who is the father: Dr. Talos or Baldanders? Who is Dorcas, who Severian really is, and all those biographical puzzlements that fans of Gene Wolfe like to delve into. The actual insubstantiality of memory is illustrated in the *Soldier in the Mist* where Latro the soldier daily loses his memory of the previous day.

HOWever, ambiguity is not confined to Wolfe or Kafka. Ambiguity is the essence of fine fiction. The development of a plot is not laid out in a straight line, it passes points where the reader is uncertain or even misled about facts, especially in mysteries. Full ambiguity is merely the case when uncertainties remain uncertainties. But all the arts, poetry, arts, music, visual have no finalities, it lets the beholder form personal perceptions and allows development through

time for this perception. Ambiguity is an element common to all fiction, but with Wolfe its proportions are greater.

### 16. Memory

Gene Wolfe has said in the interview with David de Beer in 2008 ([http://www.nebulaawards.com/index.php/interview/gene\\_wolfe/](http://www.nebulaawards.com/index.php/interview/gene_wolfe/)):

"My great theme is memory. I'm rarely aware of that as I write, but I realize it as I read". Remembering the past, as with Severian or the narrator of *Peace*, or not remembering it at all, as with the soldier Latro is indeed prominent in his writing. And so it is with Proust, whose entire *Remembrances of the Past??* deals with that. But an interesting point can be made about the "diabolical eucharists", so called by Wolfe, in which Severian takes part. There eating of the brain of Thecla's corpse implants her memories into his own brain. The formula distilled from the brain of the extraterrestrial animal *alzabo* is a component of this ritual. However, we may ponder whether anytime we read a very similar action is taking place: waves in Wolfe's brain generate words and images in his mind, which he transmits to us coded in black symbols printed on paper. These symbols are absorbed into our brains and there recreate the waves generated in Wolfe's mind. Are we not reliving his mental experiences? Perhaps the *alzabo*'s role is played by the manufacturers of the materials of the book as well as by the publisher and the editor and the bookstore. Parallel processes, of course, are true in any mode of information exchange between people.

### 17. Religion

Wolfe's Catholic persuasion, which is always expressed by him with a modicum in taste is regularly cited by commentators as a major formant of his work. It may sometimes be quite evident because a given symbol, like the sword or a staff, so often met in his creations obviously stands for the Christian cross, but GW is far more universal than that: there are many other religious elements hidden behind the obvious ones. Catholicism in GW surpasses the narrower and mostly dogmatic spirit of worldly churches, rather, it readily incorporates other creeds and world views. His religion appears more true because it is universal.

There are two sides to religion: divinity and ethics. The ethical side of GW's work, which unfortunately has not received much emphasized, is embodied in his espousal of kindness and mercifulness. Love and decency in Severian or Dorcas or Silk unequivocally outweigh the same traits in Calvin or the Vatican administrators or the brahmins of India who at first did not look kindly on Mother Theresa. Quiet and unspoken goodwill for people and animals is ever present in Wolfe's stories, and it gives them a special beauty.

He also deals with religion in a wider sense, with the variety of its many manifestations. Sects appear in *TBONS*, like the matriarchal priesthood of the Pelerines or Vodalus' company of aristocrats who eat the dead person's brain to gain its memories. There is enough room in GW's fictional panoramas to allow the appearance of the pagan deities, spirits and monsters. GW said in an interview with James B. Jordan about *There Are Doors* that he differs from formal church views and thinks that the pagan gods were real. This is an intelligent idea because the existence of God cannot be proven, it can only be believed, and that is its strength. Who can argue that, no matter how irrational and devoid of proof things believed by people may be, if they believe it, these notions do exist in their minds, to no lesser extent than belief in God does. All of our recalled and expected experiences except the present moment are beliefs.

Lesser academics and peasants can be shown proof and they will still deny its truth. There were the so-called Neptunians, who firmly stuck to the ideas that the surface of the earth was formed

by the Biblical flood and scuffed at the discoveries of scientific geology initiated by the Scottish geologist, James Hutton. Similarly, the academic explanation for the origin of insect flight for a long time was claimed to have evolved from an initial gliding stage. While better theories have come forth, this nonsense is still debated by some. The "from-trees-down" or Arboreal theory of the source of bird flight is likewise still cultivated by persons who refuse to look at the ample number of fossilized feathered dinosaur-like terrestrial proto-birds found in the recent decade.

The idea of the absolute and indescribable nature of divinity is expressed in circumventual ways in GW's novels; in *TBONS* he applies the terms "The Inchoate", "The Increate", "The Pancreator", "The Conciliator" to refer to a higher being without defining him (or her).

The sun is a central element in *TBONS*, *TBOLS* and *TBOSS* at the story level. But it plays another important role in *TBONS*: it is the symbol of life-giving divinity. This is quite literally expressed in the episode with the green man in the *Claw of the Conciliator*, book 2 of *TBONS*. He is an extraterrestrial human from a race that has incorporated photosynthesis into the body and so is directly nourished by sunlight. In various religions, pagan or Christian, mythical or spiritual meaning can be embodied in the sun. Forms of sun worship that have existed in different places and times is reflected in the roles the sun plays in Wolfe's works. The novels of the New, the Long and the Short suns are wonderfully connected with the sun's astronomically predicted eventual reddening and death, and with the artificial suns of the future shining in worlds built out in space.

Carrying a wound can naturally carry religious overtones. In *TBONS* Severian becomes lame, one leg of his dog Triskele has been chopped off. In *TBSS* the hero (who seems to be the mysterious Silk of *TBLS*) also limps, and we also meet Seawrack, who is named after a particular seaweed, is a kindhearted mermaid missing one arm, and so on. These essentially appear to be symbols of the wounds inflicted on Jesus the Christ, or perhaps more broadly represent a price to be paid for entering paradise, or the suffering allotted to those who do not deserve it, or the fragility of earthly bodies in general. It should not be forgotten that Wolfe, drawing on his experiences in the Korean War and so may have more physical and emotional acquaintance with cold, pain, fear and injury than Henry James, a celebrity in London's social salons or even Proust, who served as an army officer for one year during peacetime.

### **18. Technical knowledge in Wolfe's stories**

Technological devices and processes in Wolfe's novels are never without solid scientific basis. Even time and space transformations through Father Inire's mirrors are explained the best way today's knowledge permits. In his interviews GW readily comments on literature of all types, philosophies, religions, metaphysics, cosmology, technology, especially engineering, manufacturing, sciences, biology, evolution, history, ethnography, sociology, languages, war and weaponry, and his writing shows knowledge of animals, ships and sailing. He is a teacher, too, and has given brief but superb instruction in methods, organization and sources in writing well. True professionals in whatever field, including writers and engineers like himself, would be articulate in many of these subjects—but hardly in all. Must people be told to recognize a genius?

### **19. Technicalities in story telling**

Hidden clues are frequent in Wolfe's stories. Two of these, *The Solar Labyrinth* and *The Detective of Dreams* actually present puzzles to be solved from clues in the text. In *TBONS* we

come across ambiguous and mystifying use—are they clues?—of variant names of Dorcas, abbreviated as "Cas by the old boatman, and the syllabic inversion "Casdoe" in the incident with the alzado in Chapter.... Moreover, *dorcas* in Greek means "gazelle", and "doe" in "Cas-do" is the gazelle of the temperate north. Is this just an accident? The name of St. Jonas, who was beaten till his ribs showed, is connected in an ingenuous way to how Severian, trying to cure Jonas' s burns reaches under the latter's shirt and suddenly feels metal, thereby discovering that Jonas is not a human but a robot.

## **20. Father and son**

Father and son relationships often emerge in Wolfe's work. Not in the case of Severian as he, like all students in the torturers' guild are orphans, and have not known their parents. Elsewhere, most notably in TFHC the son hates and eventually kills his own father. Readers with a psychological bend would have likely suspected that GW had a father problem. Judging from his own words Wolfe in the midst of a loving family lived a normal childhood and such darker relationships is only one of the many themes of personality his enormous talent has explored. Throughout his work he has told tales of both good and bad relationships between parents and their children.

## **21. Animals**

Animals playing important roles, whether amicable, comic or malevolent are replete in many of Wolfe's narratives. The supernatural dog and cat in *The Knight* books, the funny talking bird (name??) in the Silk epics TBSS and TBLs?, Latro's horse in the *Soldier of Sidon* or the alien alzado, Severian's dog Triskele, or the ape-men in *TBONS* are all exhibits of the author's genuine religion, here in the form of extending love to animals, as rightfully equals to humans, as was professed by St. Francis of Assisi, and quite unlike the ways dictated by the Bible.

## **22. Dialectics / Philosophy - The Golden Mean**

An emphasis on dialectic contrasts is a hallmark of Gene Wolfe and it may intend to show us that life and nature are inherently dialectic, where the interaction of opposites regulates all active systems, be that gravity vs. locomotion, good and bad, pain and pleasure, that all phenomena on the world are composed of opposing forces, and that tranquillity is achieved when balance between antagonists is equalized. This is, of course, not only the essence of any mechanical and mental activity, but it is also the Middle Way, the primary worldly (though not the mental) principle of Buddhism. Thus, GW infuses in his work the essentials of Judeo-Christianity and its derivatives, and of Mazdaism as much as those of Buddhism and Hinduism. Even the sanguinary Aztec rituals were dialectic, aimed at balancing with human blood the malevolence of their gods.

## **23. The names**

Names, like all sounds prompt in us psychological sensations and responses. Writers choose names to match the nature and character of persons and places in their fiction. Names can foster ridicule, like Shakespeare's Falstaff or Dickens' Mr. Bumble, or Biblico-psychological connections, like Melville's Ahab and Ishmael, or social placement, as Henry James' Isabel Archer, or lonely anonymity as Kafka's K.

Readers sensitive to the color of words and those of the names of will recognize with pleasure the importance and range of vistas brought about by names GW has chosen in *TBONS*. They are captivating in their sounds and in their roots in history and legend. Appellations in *TBONS* possess allusive, musical and painterly natures, they are word paintings, hard to find anywhere

else.

The fact that majority of characters in this novel bear the names of Catholic saints is a strong unifying element of the novel. It is like an ethical path on which characters travel through the narrative. As if asking how much of an idealized Christian would a particular person be? The reference to saints also invests a sense of holy martyrdom in the way some persons, like Agilus, Agia or Morwenna await their deaths so fearlessly. In any case, the employ of saints' names is artistically appropriate in the religious sub-framework of *TBONS*

Borrowing names of the lesser known saint's, such as Dorcas, Thecla, Thea, Vodalus, Agia, Agilus, Jonas, Hethor, Hildegrin, Cyriaca speaks for the author's intelligence, their derivations are not obvious; if better known they would instantly appear as clichés. Thus, Severian or Jolenta certainly sounds melodious, even glamorous, if nothing else at first sight. But once we learn that both names are taken from saints and that this is true for many of the chief characters we might look for a reason, especially since those with saints' names include even the malevolent Agia and Hethor, who wish to kill Severian. We might recall GW's saying (somewhere) that there is some good in everyone and while this opinion is a matter of interpretation and semantics, it ultimately still agrees with the Judeo-Christian, as well as Hindu and Buddhist notion that a person is actually an aspect of divinity, although he or she does not to recognize it. The fact is that not all official Catholic saints were saintly. Some were wealthy aristocrats sainted through political and financial mechanizations.

Wolfe's field of interests and knowledge from which to generate names is broad enough not to require multi-page page resumes and membership in every possible society for mutual career advancement. He has the luxury to endow each of his works a special flora of appellations. Apart from those of saints in *TBONS*, the names Merryn, the Cumean sibyl's acolyte, Gyll the river and Nessus the city it flows through are borrowed, respectively, from Celtic, Norse and Greek mythology. The persona in *TBOLS*, in accordance with their personalities carry the names of plants and animals. The chief character, Patera Silk is a young priest and his name, at first suggestive of softness and femininity, in fact may recall that silk is light but unexpectedly strong: aerial balloons were made of silk, and the Mongols erupting in the steppes wore jackets with a lining of silk because that could stop arrows. Silk is also somewhat translucent, figuratively hiding little. The term "patera" is clearly taken after the Catholic "pater" (father), but the adroitly added final "a" lends the word a different, stranger color. In *The Knight* and *The Wizard* GW's designations are taken from or are patterned after those in Germanic, Norse, Anglo-Saxon and Celtic history and legend. Names in *TBOSS* are borrowed from even an wider field of international and cross-historical sources.

GW's acquaintance with Latin and Greek is evident from many clues, or at least his ability to work with those and other languages is quite discernible. The frightening extraterrestrial animal **alzabo** in *TBONS*, for example, is not only given a name that has a hint of horror, but it actually is Arabic for "hyena".

But here we also meet with GW's sense of humor, because "to sever" means to cut off, and Severian's earliest profession is executing people by cutting their heads off. And one more connectivity: the consonants of the word "sever", or /s/, /v/, /t/ are also the consonants in the English word "savior", with only a rearrangement of the vowels. Such alteration of meaning through change of vowels between consonants is the way to alter grammatical meaning in Semitic languages, and we can assume GW is aware of this. The Hebrew "shlm", for instance, is the consonantal root of the verb for "be at peace" but it also appears in "shalom", an expression of greeting, and in "Shelomo". i.e., "Solomon" in English. The term "Jehovah" is an alternate, and



essentially incorrect reading of the Hebrew "yhwh", written only with consonants in the customary Semitic manner, and which is hypothesized to be correctly voweled as "yahwe".

There are some deft ways in which GW weaves names into the story line. A good example is that of Severian's companion **Jonas**. Initially Jonah of the Bible comes to mind, he who was swallowed by the whale. But references to St. Jonas, who was eventually martyred, reveal that previously to that event, he was beaten until his exposed ribs showed. In the Antechamber episode of *TBONS* Jonas is injured by electric torture implements and in trying to help him Severian reaches under his garment to locate the injury and there finds that Jonas's torso is made of metal—he is an artificial man. Thus, a connection appears between the true identity of Jonas and St. Jonas, through a situation in which it appears in as if Jonas' ribs were showing! But GW seems to have added even more polish. The Biblical Jonas is sucked into the maw of the whale, whereas Jonas in departs by stepping into Father's Inire's magical mirrors, a mechanism that enables travel through space and time, so that the mechanical man disappears as if swallowed into the mouth of the immense universe.

The choice of a saint's name applied to a character is also generally connected to personality in question. Many who carry a wound or suffer death are thus tied to martyred persons, others to those who became sanctified for their compassion for the poor. **St. Severian**, for instance, was condemned because he comforted other Christians waiting for execution, and several of Severian's actions in the novel afford parallels. But furthermore, the word "Severian" brings to mind the English words "severe", which coming from Latin "severus", meaning "austere", "grave", "serious" correctly describes Severian, as he is a serious man with deep feelings. "Severus" was also the family name of a Roman dynasty, the so-called Severians, the last rulers in the imperial line started with Augustus. The teacher of the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius was member of a family with the same name. In addition, this imperial connection quite suitably underlies the relation of Severian to the Autarch, the emperor of Urth, and also with his own destiny, since he himself becomes the next autarch.

Severian calls the injured **dog** he finds "Triskele", but never accounts for when and why he chose that name. The appellation fits the animal left with only three legs because the first part is the root "tri-" for "three", but how do we explain the second part? It may appear to be a pet name, bearing the diminutive suffix of Romance and Germanic languages, /-l-/, like "Hansel" and "Gretel" from "Hans" and "Grete", or the Yiddish diminutive /-el/, /-ele/ as in "Yankel" from "Yakov" (Jacob). The lameness of this dog parallels that of Severian, who eventually also becomes lame. However, things are not so simple. When we look into matters more, we find that "triskele" is an ancient Celtic symbol, the original meaning of which is unknown, and which is a triad of circles, arranged as a clover leaf, that even today seems to survive as the well-known Irish symbol of festivity and good luck. The Christian Celtic tradition took it to stand for the Trinity, but earlier it may have stood for the trinity of water, earth and heavens. Wolfean fitness here: whereas a three-legged dog is a sad image of imperfection, the metaphor in the religious or cosmic sense is one of perfection. Is this why the "madness" in Triskele's eyes is "clean"?

There are names **less easy** to explain. Possibly GW intended the term **Urth**, the world of *TBONS*, to remain ambiguous. "Urth" is clearly pronounced the same as "earth", and so it might be just a science-fictionalized version of the latter. With other authors we might just leave it at that. But it is not so simple. The story appears to occur in the future, when the aging sun, losing the energy of its youth is becoming red. However, the words *Urth*, *Vertandi* and *Skuld* are the names of the three Fates in Norse mythology. Linguistically reasoned, it is thought that Vertandi is the present, Skuld is the future, and Urth is the past, and in this case identifying the time of the novel becomes uncertain. One can only surmise that Wolfe is telling us that time is relative and

essentially meaningless when we do not in any way comprehend the nature of time (notwithstanding the absurd notion that time started with the so-called Big Bang).

No etymology can be found for the name Father **Inire**. He is a the terribly old, bent over benevolent old wizard, a master of travel through space and time. The derivation of the name might be better grounded when we recognize that GW works the image of God and Jesus into his stories more often than we might expect. "Inire" is perhaps best explicable as a modification of "INRI", the acronym on the label nailed by the Romans to the cross, standing for *Jesus Nazarenius Rex Idaeorum*, and so Father Inire can represent or at least recall both or either Jesus the Christ and God the father, who is not bound by time or space. When in scenes involving or connected with Father Inire the element of a fish is brought in, this notion gains more strength: the fish was an early Christian secret symbol of Jesus the Christ, drawn from the Greek "ichtys" or "fish", serving as an abbreviation for *I(esous) Ch(ri)stos*. Catching fish is also the subject of Isangama's speech in the Jungle Garden. The manatees in the Botanic Garden episode allude to another group of aquatic beings, the nereids, or mermaids, who play important roles in Wolfean worlds. Cf. the colossal woman emerging from the deep who appears to Severian a number of times. Baldanders, oversized and a still growing adult, is also said to eventually enter the water when on land he can no longer support his gigantic body. Wolfe in one interview says that he borrowed the name "Baldanders" from a story by Jose Luis Borges, The appellation of his strange companion, Dr. Talos is drawn from a man made of metal in Greek mythology and the same word, as "talus", appears in *The Book of the Long Sun*, in the form of a fire-breathing robot guarding a house.

Before getting the change to read the chapter *Onomastics* in *Castle of Days* I was worried that Wolfe has already given it all away, but found that the things I have written here were generally not covered by him.

#### **24. On the General Tone of GW's work**

The interpreting the fundamental chord of any work depends on what chord within the mind of the reader or viewer or listener finds resonance. In the body of Wolfe's writing it is not possible to describe a general tone simply because he writes in so many different styles. For TBONS, still, one can certainly say that its overarching color is one of serene majesty. It is eloquent, reassuring, warm, and artistic beauty and the element of a universal love for all things runs through it.

#### **25. The verse rhythm**

Gibbon, the author of *The Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire* is highly regarded for the majesty of his prose. The first sentence of this work can be taken as an example: "In the second century of the Christian era the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth and the most civilized portion of mankind." If the first two unstressed syllables are taken as the upbeat bar, in musical terms, then the rest fall almost perfectly into the classical **dactylic**, or heroic verse meter. This poetic meter, formally a hexameter, or of six feet, features an initial stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones, except in the last foot and it can be represented as TAH-ti-ti. The heavy line in the third foot indicates a cadence, or phrase stop. In Gibbon's text the second syllable is the only one that misses a beat.

**Dactylic meter:****Gibbon:**

| / ~ ~ | / ~ ~ | / | ~ ~ | / ~ ~ | / ~ ~ | / ~ ~ |

| ~ ~ | / ~ | / ~ ~ ~ | / ~ ~ ~ | / ~ ~ | / ~ ~ ~ | / ~ ~ ~ |  
 In the **se**-cond **cen**-tu-ry of the **Chris**-tian er-a the **em**-pire of **Rome** com-pre-**hend**-ed the

And here is the first line of *TBONS*: "It is possible I already had some presentiment of my future." When metrified, taking the first two syllables as an upbeat this falls into **fair**-est part of the earth and the most **ci**-vi-lized **por**-tion of **man**-kind.

Note that in some cases the short unstressed syllables are merged to suit the meter, but that is permissible in poetry. If you read the sentence in this meter it **does** indeed take on the impression of dramatic stage speech. The second foot ("already") is a so-called inversion, where the stress order is reversed, and this is often used in poetry to prevent monotony in rhythm. The inversion best fits the normal pronunciation of the word "already". But this is not fixed. Actors or radio and screen narrators arrive at their own personal ways of phrasing, they can choose within limits where to put stress for shaping the drama of their speech. So, the first part of this sentence can alternately be parsed without an inversion, by blending the second and third syllables of "possible" with "I", in which case the second foot is plain dactylic:

What about Henry James, that colossus of the English novel? He begins *The Portrait of a Lady* with: "Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not—some people of course never do,—the situation is in itself delightful." Here is the parsing:

Un-der | cer-tain | cir-cum-stanc-es | there are few hours in life | more a-gree-a-ble | than the hour

There is no recognizable meter here, this is everyday colloquial, a petty statement peddled as often as possible, does not suggest that there are people who are better or worse depending on whether they have tea or do not? "Agreeability" is a soggy bourgeois notion. What are certain circumstances? When you can exchange or overhear gossip? The unknowns hinted here are really not revealed later in this soap opera, there is nothing here to be revealed.

It is thus obvious why Wolfe's writing is what it is: his narrative projects elegant rhythmic patterns. He opens his famous tetralogy with the heroic measure, the dactylic, echoing the same majestic cadences prized in Gibbon, and like him untiringly carries that pattern through the entire work. Here is the next sentence: "The locked and rusted gate that stood before us, with wisps of river fog threading its spikes like the mountain paths, remains in my mind now as the symbol of my exile." No parsing is needed to further prove the mastery of rhythm, while the very last clause, like the final stanza of a sonnet suddenly delivers an unexpected statement and implants a foreboding of coming mystery. When you pick up a book that starts like this you don't put it back on the shelves but quickly check the amount of money you have on you. This is one of the many things that makes Wolfe the world-class novelist. How many of the innumerable prize winners write like this?