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Tyler Garvey

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An Examination of Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*:
Literary and Mythological Significance

Tyler Garvey

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Dr. Matt Bell, Thesis Director

Dr. Kathleen Vejvoda, Committee Member

Dr. Anne Doyle, Committee Member

Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* is an enigmatic and labyrinthine text that demands that the reader solve its mysteries. Everything is written but little is clear. Powerful symbols are evoked to bewilder and astonish, while the reader is guided by a narrator who forgets nothing and himself suggests a rereading, compelling one to turn back the pages to compare the smallest of details. The imagination quickens at the poetry of this narrator whose sensitivities are at once immediately familiar and surprisingly penetrating, the fantasies found here never suggesting something less than significance. The mysteries to be resolved align themselves in imprecise forms identified with vastly outdated words and phrases; religious devices and hard scientific perspectives are intermingled in the construction of a narrative that would appear to entertain either interpretation. To illuminate the mythological and symbolic power of this text is the purpose of this examination of *The Book of the New Sun*, responding to a critical reading written by Peter Wright, a reading that touts intentional authorial misleading as the basis of its naturalistic conclusion.

Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* is a science-fantasy series, a genre that combines elements of traditional science fiction and fantasy, of five volumes: a tetralogy composed of *The Shadow of the Torturer* (1980), *The Claw of the Conciliator* (1981), *The Sword of the Lictor* (1982), *The Citadel of the Autarch* (1983); and a coda titled *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987). It is a curious and almost occult body of writing, receiving speculation and praise upon its initial release but quickly fading into the background of contemporary literature. This is due largely to its status as a work of science fiction that crosses over into fantasy, its place in genre fiction denying *The Book of the New Sun* the attention of many readers who are plagued by assumptions, often rightly, of the tropes

and stereotypes that such works perpetuate for the interests of a niche demographic. In his review of the classic science-fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Robert A. Heinlein, 1961), Ronald Lee Cansler offers an accurate depiction of the challenges facing the genre:

Once, the term “science fiction” conjured up the image of a thirteen-year-old, pimply faced boy charging over a hill in a vacant lot, blasting away at Bug-Eyed-Monsters while wearing a plasticized “space helmet” and toting a chromed “ray gun”. Now, however, science fiction has come of age and does not need to be defended to most readers as a viable and important form of literature...However, science fiction still deserves more attention, both as a literary genre and in relation to individual works. Accordingly, the discussion now turns to science fiction as a literary medium with valid approaches, great and often fulfilled potential for social criticism, and high entertainment value...(98)

The image of the little boy reveling in the pure fantasy of childhood in conjunction with one of the garishly illustrated novels of science fiction is sufficient grounds for dismissal for many seeking an engaging reading experience, and unfortunately this causes many accomplished texts to be overlooked. Cansler continues by saying “...I must admit that science fiction has been, is, and shows no indication of becoming anything other than, a minor literary form” (98). This review comes from an issue of the *Journal of Popular Culture* published in 1972, and so Cansler has been proven correct. So amidst this literary and cultural atmosphere, how is *The Book of the New Sun* to be regarded, and how have those open to a reading that goes beyond the cover art received it? John Clute, literary

reviewer and vocal supporter of Wolfe and his work, says it best in his review “The Urth and All Its Glory”:

[If] Gene Wolfe is to be taken seriously—and however thrilling or pleasing [*The Book of the New Sun*] may seem, there is simply no point at all in thinking of its author as a creator of mere speculative entertainment—then he must be taken as attempting something analogous to Dante’s supreme effort [*The Divine Comedy*]. With great urgency, layer after layer, he has created a world radiant with meaning, a novel that makes sense in the end only if it is read as an attempt to represent the Word of God. How intimate—how dizzyingly remote—how comforting or alienating that Word can be, each reader will of course discover. (478)

Clute evokes a Judeo-Christian reading here with reference to the Word of God, a reading based on notable evidence, but a theological reading that limits the scope of the entire mythological picture. That being said, Clute’s comparison of Wolfe’s work with Dante’s is high praise, and the assertion of Wolfe’s purpose in writing *The Book of the New Sun* accurately pinpoints the goal of this 20th-century novel in several parts. In his review Bob Collins notes, “Wolfe’s achievement, though, is nothing less than the mythic conflation of the whole of human drama, something the ‘first reader’ of such a book may sense, but no review can possibly summarize” (478). Clute and Collins both make mention of a “mythic conflation” of sorts taking place beneath the fantastic aesthetic of Wolfe’s writing, and both acknowledge the difficulty of this understanding amidst the “dizzyingly remote” devices Wolfe employs in its enacting. There is strangeness, deceptiveness to this text that inspires a curiosity, a curiosity justified in the properties of its pursuit, those

being a rereading, the study of mythology, the study of science, and an examination of the readers' own perceptions of themselves and of the world. Somtow Sucharitkul remarks in a review of the third volume:

In a very real sense, it is this very familiarity, not the baroque weirdness of its textures, that makes *Sword of the Lictor* so powerful. For Wolfe never loses sight of his sources, his mythical resonances. It is his classical adherence to that most ancient of literary structures, the finding of self within a journey through fantastical and ever-widening landscapes, that pushes the book beyond eccentricity into greatness. (476)

There is an encrypted knowledge to be gleaned from Wolfe's words, and from a story set in a far future world of myth and fantasy, and as Sucharitkul makes clear, the seeking of this knowledge is joyous because of the readily apparent credibility the text displays. To return briefly to Cansler: "Historically, the extraordinary, the supranatural has been found more worthy of consideration in the telling of great tales than has the mundane existence of trivial lives in the 'real' world" (98). Wolfe knows this well, and so does the boy leading a charge with ray gun in hand, for children have no predisposition to the overwhelming veracity of the perceived world. *The Book of the New Sun* could not be the thoughtful and poetic work that it is without its fantasy and its willingness to trust in symbols.

To best appreciate that symbolic vitality, one must be oriented within Wolfe's world. *The Book of the New Sun* introduces Severian, a man who claims perfect and complete memory, recounting his own history years after the events of the novels, writing the narrative entirely in the first person. With his mnemonic condition he assures the

reader that nothing has been left out or corrupted by time and forgetfulness. The story takes place on the world of Urth, a name that is symbolic of the brutalized and culturally barren landscape that Earth has become millions of years in the future. Humankind has journeyed to the stars and beyond, returning to Urth to languish and degenerate, the evidence of the might once displayed serving only to mystify and serve the inhabitants of this world in fashions that betray the purpose of their construction. Derelict spacecrafts are referred to as towers; the cities, the mountains, and the terrain of Urth are adorned with majestic art and objects of achievement standing forlorn and misunderstood, while beneath this cornucopia of humanity the actual beings reassume a simple existence. Culture is not completely absent, but like the advanced knowledge much of it is hidden and coveted by the elite, the extraterrestrial, and the sycophantic. The Commonwealth is the center of the plot, an expanse of mountains, rivers and pampas bordered on either side by the ocean, home to the vast cities of Nessus and Thrax. The prevailing ideology of the Commonwealth is a faith in the Conciliator and the New Sun, a religion centered around a belief that the dying sun that hangs in the sky will be regenerated by a savior who can negotiate the miraculous between the beings that sail between the stars and the humble citizens of Urth. The “old sun” in the sky is a brooding red, weak for lack of energy, the stars of farther galaxies visible in the atmosphere even in the light of day. Its diminished state reflects the people who live under it. The coming of the New Sun will flood the Urth, cleansing it of its impurities and giving rise with the abatement of the deluge to a rejuvenated people and culture. This religion serves to structure the reader’s perception of

the novel, serves as a common thread to tie the wide cast of characters together, and ultimately appears prophetic or disingenuous through the actions of Severian.¹

Approaching the text of *The Book of the New Sun* requires great attention to every detail, of which there is an exhaustive supply. The text is riddled with information that sends the reader down many different paths, Wolfe's extensive use of archaic diction and cryptic description elevating the stifling air of mystery to create an oppressive atmosphere of thought, and a shortness of interpretive breath that leaves the reader gasping for answers. Among Severian's many extra-narrative musings emerge metafictional insights that offer lenses through which the text can be better observed. Towards the end of *The Shadow of the Torturer*, Severian discovers that he possesses the Claw of the Conciliator, and this discovery coincides with his and Dorcas's witnessing the miraculous rising of a flaming cathedral above Nessus. This prompts a philosophical discussion between the two as they journey northward, and compels Severian to relate to Dorcas a story from the brown book he carries, which supposedly contains keys to the universe:

Thecla and I used to read them and talk about them, and one of them was that everything, whatever happens, has three meanings. The first is its practical meaning, what the book calls, "the thing the plowman sees." The cow has taken a mouthful of grass, and it is real grass, and a real cow—that meaning is as important and as true as either of the others. The second is the reflection of the world about it. Every object is in contact with all others, and thus the wise can learn of the others by observing the first.

¹ For a complete summary of *The Book of the New Sun* that addresses each of the five novels, turn to the Appendix beginning on page 33.

That might be called the soothsayers' meaning, because it is the one such people use when they prophesy a fortunate meeting from the tracks of serpents or confirm the outcome of a love affair by putting the elector of one suit atop the patroness of another...The third is the transsubstantial meaning. Since all objects have their ultimate origin in the Pancreator, and all were set in motion by him, so all must express his will—which is the higher reality. (*Shadow*, 190)

To summarize then, objects are seen 1) as they appear before the naked eye, by simple observation; 2) through how they interact with the world about them and what significance is held through this interaction; and 3) through how their existence and its actions express the directions and intent of an omniscient will that governs all things.

“The Book of the New Sun” is a religious text that exists within the fictional *Book of the New Sun* that is being examined here, and with that in mind there is a distinction present between Severian’s fictional readers, whom he addresses and may be assumed to be followers of the New Sun, and Wolfe’s readers in reality. This textual layering thus divides *The Book of the New Sun* into fictional scripture and a work of science fantasy, Severian’s dialogue above reflecting the interpretive practices of traditional exegesis, as exemplified by the early Christian theologian Origen:

The individual ought, then, to portray the ideas of holy Scripture in a threefold manner upon his own soul; in order that the simple man may be edified by the “flesh,” as it were, of the Scripture, for so we name the obvious sense; while he who has ascended a certain way [may be edified] by the “soul,” as it were. The perfect man, again, and he who resembles

those spoken of by the apostle...[may receive edification] from the spiritual law, which has a shadow of good things to come. For as man consists of body, and soul, and spirit, so in the same way does Scripture, which has been arranged to be given by God for the salvation of men.

(1860)

Origen's writing is in direct correlation with the theory of interpretation found in "The Wonders of Urth and Sky," the brown book from which Severian lifts the stories explaining keys to universal explanation. With this in mind the reader can comprehend the words he reads on the page, how they resonate with "The Book of the New Sun" as a whole, and the driving purpose of authorial intent and the apotheosis of the New Sun. The fact that the Severian writing this history as a fictional prophet is inhabited by many different minds and personalities by the time he becomes Autarch is even more significant given the nature of biblical authorship. The Bible as it is known likely had several different authors, redactors and scribes working with numerous pieces of writing to compose the unified text familiar to readers today. When it is learned that the Severian as Autarch is a multi-faceted being consisting of all of the previous Autarchs inhabiting Severian's body, it complicates the narrative perspective, further evidence of this provided by Thecla's memories interrupting the flow of the text uninhibited at numerous occasions, without warning or indication. The fictitious account then likely has many different authors, as does the Bible, marking the three-fold interpretive method as especially significant.

The duality of this text is immediately acknowledged after Severian relates this story and its meta-implications. Speaking for the readers of *The Book of the New Sun* is

Dorcas, when she responds to what Severian has told her, saying, “It seems to me that what you call the third meaning is very clear. But the second meaning is harder to find, and the first, which ought to be the easiest, is impossible” (*Shadow*, 191). On a first reading this rings especially true, with places and things being described in deceptive fashion and portentous events broadcasting solutions to a puzzle that is solved backwards. When Wolfe’s meaning does become clear and subsequent explorations illuminate clues and connections that develop the subtext with their unveiling, the objects and seemingly familiar story elements that have seemed innocuous at first begin to raise questions. Rather than denying the previous interpretive method and its religious implication Dorcas’s suggestion builds on it, acknowledging to the actual readers Wolfe’s omnipotence over his own story and urging a further analysis following the initial understanding. Dividing Dorcas’s perceptive reaction from the asserted ideology of the brown book draws a severe line between approaches to this narrative, clarifying the gray area between miracles and artifice. In his naturalistic reading Peter Wright, a scholar whose work will later be examined in greater detail, utilizes Dorcas’s words to expose the tenuous nature of religious depiction in the text:

Dorcas’s perspicacity emphasizes the process of adumbration at work within the human psyche. The people of the Commonwealth are so distanced from the reality of their universe by their need for a transcendental relevance that they cannot apprehend straightforward biological relationships through the imposed veils of superstition, personified by the soothsayers, and organized religious dogma, represented by a belief in the Pancreator. (76)

Several characters certainly display this method of thinking, and this psychology importantly notes the imperfections of religious beliefs and how they can often work to conceal truths that are otherwise self-evident. Wright continues by noting that Wolfe is almost certainly counting on this same psychology affecting a certain reading demographic, remarking that “it seems probable that the reader will undergo the same degree of abstraction from fictive reality as a consequence of his or her corresponding sensitivity to mythic accounts of existence” (77). In this way Wolfe maintains the amorphous conclusions a reader is likely to draw from an initial reading, flirting with two extremes of universal explanation while offering just enough to push the argument in either direction, this argument largely being decided by the readers own predispositions.

It is important to note Wolfe’s employment of deception and playful misleading, and that there are several clues to be found which inform the reader that what outcomes they might expect will be resolved in purposefully deviant fashion. The very first chapter would serve to be an outline that might cater to the expectations of the reader, who sees a darkly hooded man with a great sword on the novel’s cover, and could well expect to be entertained by formulaic fantasy. As the pages turn this illusion gives way to the meticulously constructed and original narrative, yet the initial impression does not fade completely, continuing to tug at the imagination of the reader as Dorcas might tug the soiled hem of Severian’s cloak, encouraging with warmth and knowledge what is expected while inviting the unfamiliar. Appropriately it is after Dorcas’s strange emergence that Severian’s narration turns to remark on the materialization of the foreign, a reflection inspired by his bewilderment at the sudden appearance of Dorcas’s floral headdress:

Is it possible the flower came into being only because Dorcas reached for it? In daylight moments, I know as well as the next that such things are impossible; but I am writing by night, and then, when I sat in that boat with the hyacinth less than a cubit from my eyes, I wondered at the dim light and recalled Hildegrin's remark of a moment before, a remark that implied...that the seeress's cave, and thus this garden, was on the opposite side of the world. (*Shadow*, 147)

A pale water hyacinth appearing in the hair of a bewildered girl, at her behest, "...the first flower I had seen in the Garden of Endless Sleep..." (*Shadow*, 147), flings Severian north of the "waist of the world," as he would call it, and allows him to share in the strangeness the reader has so far been oppressed by. *The Shadow of the Torturer* moves like a somnambulist through its opening episodes, crushing its reader with the ancient weight of archaic vocabulary unknown to most dictionaries, with frequent pauses and obscure reflections, and transitions so understated that when a climax comes it peaks and falls seemingly without incident. Wolfe knows what is expected, and this passage in the botanical gardens allows Severian the narrator to admit to the reader that the promised destination is seen through a fog some distance away, separated from the ground below the torturers boots by murky and dangerous waters. Severian uses his own education and the recurring celestial imagery to explain the dizzying task of orientation in *The Book of the New Sun*:

There, [the opposite side of the world], as Master Malrubius had taught us long ago, all was reversed: warmth to the south, cold to the north; light at night, dark by day; snow in summer. The chill I felt would be appropriate

then, for it would be summer soon, with sleet riding the wind; the darkness that stood even between my eyes and the blue flowers of the water hyacinth would be appropriate then too, for it would soon be night, with light already in the sky. (*Shadow*, 147)

The reader understands the opposing climates and time zones as the conventional difference between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres of Earth, and thus Urth, but to Severian it is a greater difference, and serves as an oblique allusion to the persistent duality of interpretation. Severian sits wondering on his side of the world of the mystery of the other, and the reader may sit either with the narrator or in his own craft of thought on the other side of the world, wondering with equal validity at the enigma of an alternate perspective.

The basis for the scientific and purely rationalistic reading of *The Book of the New Sun* rests largely with Peter Wright's *Attending Daedalus: Gene Wolfe, Artifice and the Reader*, an extensive and well-researched work of scholarship. Here Wright illuminates the breadth of Gene Wolfe's work as an author through the 1990s, dedicating a significant section to the close study of *The Book of the New Sun*. Wright pays especial attention to Wolfe's writing style, and the struggle to comprehend it. Wright remarks that "By changing generic codes, subverting traditional literary conventions, employing an unreliable narrator and exploiting the deflective effect of unfamiliar diction, Wolfe creates a text organized specifically to be understood, or at least appreciated, only by those readers who are willing to question their own literary assumptions, pause, reflect, and reread" (166). This observation of Wolfe's writing rings true, especially the latter half of the statement. Acknowledging these devices of literary artifice, in the fifth chapter

of the book Wright states his interpretation of *The Book of the New Sun*: “The story of The Urth Cycle describes a human race caught in two complex processes: that of an external cosmological conspiracy masterminded by the Hierogrammates, and that of its own psychological need for lenitive myths” (69). Wright examines these myths and the religious elements of Wolfe’s work to uncover the eugenic engineering of humanity by a race of higher beings, here titled the Hierogrammates, represented in *The Urth of the New Sun* by the characters Tzadkiel and Apheta, presented as male and female respectively in their primary manifestations and serving to guide Severian in a parental fashion through the orchestrated apotheosis. In his work *Lexicon Urthus: A Dictionary for the Urth Cycle*, in which the history and usage of Wolfe’s obscure vocabulary is clarified, Michael Andre-Driussi gives the following definition for Hierogrammate: “A sacred scribe, one of a lower order of the Egyptian priesthood; a writer of sacred records, specifically of hieroglyphics” (171). The moniker is appropriate then as the Hierogrammates indeed have a hand in the construction of the solar mythology that shapes *The Book of the New Sun*, yet Wright sees their role in this construction and the fulfillment of the mythos as strictly selfish, a way in which to ensure their own survival.

Acknowledging that Tzadkiel, Apheta and their kind have used Severian and the humans of Urth to prevent their own degeneration leaves the spiritual essence of *The Book of the New Sun* feeling deceptive. The allusions and symbols that evoke the mythos of Christ, solar deities, and the esoteric practices of early South Americans are found repeatedly throughout the text, forming the base for and the conception of Severian’s apparent apotheosis. As Peter Wright has claimed in his purely secular reading of Wolfe’s series of novels, the trappings of spiritual lore serve only as a mechanism in the

greater engineering of a submissive and ignorant human race, appealing to a deep-seated need for divine presence and prophecy. As he understands Wolfe's design, "The success of the Hierogrammates' clandestine strategies depends on their capacity to convince Severian of his own divinity and on the divine nature of their actions. This seduction is effected by Tzadkiel, who nurtures Severian's faith by assuming the guise of an angel...and who employs suitably inflated, pseudo-religious rhetoric to account for the Hierogrammates' actions" (79). In Wright's opinion, the Hierogrammates are effectively, then, the authors of a false scripture and mysticism of Urth. Religion and spirituality have long been used by ruling bodies and governments to establish structure and order among people, its power and mystery providing justification for the peculiar instances of human life. The goal of Tzadkiel and Apheta, as proposed by Wright, is to effectively organize the beings of Urth into generating a representative appropriate for and adaptable to their purposes. Since the objective of the manipulation of those on Urth is to prevent the degeneration of a race, the foretelling of a New Sun and the various instances of theophany in the text are used as tools for selection. It is a bold reading based on a Darwinian, interstellar process of selection that is not without credibility. Wright's reading is studied and thorough, but not final. To move into a broader interpretation of *The Book of the New Sun*, a working knowledge of mythological symbolism and its transcendent properties is required.

A reading of *The Book of the New Sun* that moves beyond the machinations of science-fiction, that views its construction and execution through the mythologies of Gene Wolfe and Severian alike, is greatly aided by Joseph Campbell's 1949 work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. To summarize briefly, Campbell's writing details

episodically the journey of the archetypal hero that is found across all cultures, in all periods of time throughout the world. This structure that Campbell illuminates is known as the monomyth, the one great story of man so much apart of his nature that its retelling is inevitable, albeit taking different forms and figurations internationally. “The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth” (23): this unit in its simplicity is utterly complete, and essential for the success of a symbolic story. Most evident from reading Campbell is the sheer power of myth, and its connection with dream symbols and human psychology are compelling in their implications. Campbell’s explanation of mythology moves beyond religion and the art of storytelling to something more essentially human, abstract in the forms and characters it adopts but therefore allowing for individual understanding.

Campbell states, “It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth” (1). It is an absolute statement, but one that proves invaluable in reading *The Book of the New Sun* and approaching a working navigation of its structure, symbols, philosophical interludes, and cerebral dream episodes that hang on the page with an arch significance that is yet too obscure to assume any complete picture of clarity. In the opening chapter of *The Shadow of the Torturer*, Severian makes an observation that touches on this notion: “Certain mystes aver that the real world has been constructed by the human mind, since our ways are governed by the

artificial categories into which we place essentially undifferentiated things, things weaker than our words for them. I understood the principle intuitively that night..." (*Shadow*, 11). From the beginning Severian insinuates the fact that he has an understanding of concepts and constructs essential to humanity that in their complexity render language astoundingly overwrought. What the mythology that Campbell examines accomplishes in its deceptive simplicity is directly analogous to the religious and mythical systems displayed and cycled in *The Book of the New Sun*. Severian and therefore Wolfe understand this, and trust the reader to reach this understanding themselves.

Of the multitudinous instances of duality, the incident of the rising cathedral is one that Wolfe establishes in the esoteric sense but then later deconstructs with rational thought. Prefacing this miraculous vision is Severian's discovery of the Claw of the Conciliator, and the fact that what follows appears so portentous lends it a great significance. As Severian and Dorcas wonder at the Claw, they see the following: "Hanging over the city like a flying mountain in a dream was an enormous building—a building with towers and buttresses and an arched roof. Crimson light poured from its windows. I tried to speak, to deny the miracle even as I saw it; but before I could frame a syllable, the building had vanished like a bubble in a fountain, leaving only a cascade of sparks" (*Shadow*, 188). The vision is nothing short of spectacular, and it is an instance of theophany that sets the tone of the religious narrative that henceforth becomes more closely woven into the text. In the following novel however, this event is downplayed into the mundane, through passing conversation with a nameless character no less. At the festival in Saltus, Severian questions an elderly woman about the location of the

Pelerines, a religious organization whose temporary abode was the cathedral of the vision. The old woman confirms the rising, but explains it thus:

“When my grandson-in-law heard about it, he was fairly struck flat for half a day. Then he pasted up a kind of hat out of paper and held it over my stove, and it went up, and then he thought it was nothing that the cathedral rose, no miracle at all. That shows what it is to be a fool—it never came to him that the reason things were made so was so the cathedral would rise just like it did. He can’t see the Hand in nature.”

“He didn’t see it himself?” I asked. “The cathedral, I mean.”

She failed to understand. “Oh, he’s seen it when they’ve been through here, at least a dozen times.” (*Claw*, 229)

As the cathedral was made of canvas, its rising into the air could be explained through simple science. As the old woman understands however, this explanation does not discredit the event entirely or mark it as trivial. Unlike Severian, the young man who burned the paper did not witness the cathedral rising himself, and therefore the power of the vision was never presented to him. For Severian the sight is a turning point, and it serves to make whole his relationship with Dorcas. As he explains, “It was only after the vision of that great building hanging, then vanishing, above the city, that I knew I had come to love Dorcas...And because our thoughts were entirely of what we had seen, our spirits embraced without hindrance, each passing through those few seconds of vision as if through a door never previously opened and never to be opened again” (*Shadow*, 189). The metaphysical interplay of their two “spirits” is significant, and this intimacy inspires the philosophical conversation between them referenced above.

Miracles occur in several instances throughout *The Book of the New Sun* through the use of the mysterious Claw of the Conciliator, ‘...the most precious of gems’ (*Shadow*, 29). If Severian is a thaumaturge then the Claw is his instrument, although an inconsistent one. Raising those seeming dead back to life and healing severe injuries are actions that it inspires, but it does not perform on every occasion. For each acknowledged success there are a number of failures, and Severian is never sure when he attempts to draw forth its power that he will accomplish what he wishes. The gem itself is revered, a recognized religious relic, yet as with all things in *The Book of the New Sun* there is another explanation for its revered status and capabilities. Dorcas proposes this theory as to the comprehension of its powers:

Severian, when you brought the uhlan back to life it was because the Claw twisted time for him to the point at which he still lived. When you half healed your friend’s wounds, it was because it bent the moment to one when they would be nearly healed. And when you fell into the fen in the Garden of Endless Sleep, it must have touched me or nearly touched me, and for me it became the time in which I had lived, so that I lived again. But I have been dead. For a long, long time I was dead, a shrunken corpse preserved in the brown water. (*Sword*, 60)

So the argument that the Claw is no more than a device through which time is distorted is proposed, and given the fact that movements back and forth through time are possible in this story, it is not without its merit. Peter Wright suggests, “all of the apparently mystical incidents that the artefact propagates can be accounted for rationally by appealing to the physical and scientific laws operative in Wolfe’s fictional heterocosm” (82), Wright

understands the Claw as an enigmatic mechanism functioning within the established system of cross-dimensional travel. The final analysis of the relic Wright offers is that “The Claw’s reanimatory and curative properties arise from its functions as the focal point of a localized time-travel field, directing massive amounts of energy from the White Fountain through Severian. The Claw is, therefore, the locus for a power external to Severian” (83). The energy that the Claw uses does indeed come from an external source, but this examination leaves Severian an unremarkable conductor of the direction of this energy.

Ultimately the Claw is symbolic, and with the knowledge that the greatest role Severian will play will be that of the Conciliator himself, any mechanistic assumptions of the utility of the Claw are irrelevant. Furthering his thinking on the Claw, Wright makes note of an acknowledgement made in *The Urth of the New Sun*: “When Apheta suggests that the Claw’s ability to channel energy from the White Fountain arises from its immersion in Severian’s blood...there is clearly an equation being drawn between blood and the Claw’s potency” (83). What this observation accomplishes is the glorification of Severian’s blood, and that any phenomena the Claw as an object may be responsible for is rooted in the fact that it was immersed in the life of the Conciliator. Severian comes to realize the futility of attributing the power he has witnessed and stimulated to a mere talisman, for when he comes across the Claw of the Conciliator in a strange place, after already having returned it to the Pelerines, he is able to muse with lucidity on the reality of the eternal, omnipresent divine:

What struck me on the beach and it struck me indeed, so that I staggered
as at a blow—was that if the Eternal Principle had rested in that curved

thorn I had carried about my neck across so many leagues, and if it now rested in the new thorn (perhaps the same thorn) I had only now put there, then it might rest in anything, and in fact probably did rest in everything, in every thorn on every bush, in every drop of water in the sea. The thorn was a sacred Claw because all thorns were sacred Claws; the sand in my boots was sacred sand because it came from a beach of sacred sand...everything had approached and even touched the Pancreator, because everything had dropped from his hand. Everything was a relic. All the world was a relic. I drew off my boots, that had traveled with me so far, and threw them into the waves that I might not walk shod on holy ground. (*Citadel*, 367)

This often cited passage from *The Citadel of the Autarch* touches on a great many ideas, one of these being the principle of the entirety in the fragment, the individual piece, which resurfaces frequently throughout *The Book of the New Sun*. As Campbell suggests, “Because, finally, the All is everywhere, and anywhere may become the seat of power. Any blade of grass may assume, in myth, the figure of the savior and conduct the questing wanderer into the sanctum sanctorum of his own heart” (35). Severian is able to access miraculous energies not through the function of a time-travel device, but through the infinite channel of all of Urth. The White Fountain is indeed the external source of energy, yet it is an intimate part of Severian’s being, and all the world is an outlet for the expression of its power.

The White Fountain itself is the key by which the Conciliator unlocks the New Sun from within the old. It is a magnificent galactic appearance, immaculate and gravid with the energy of genesis, described with language astronomically abstract:

You know of the chasms of space, which some call the Black Pits, from which no speck of matter or gleam of light ever returns. But what you have not known until now is that these chasms have their counterparts in White Fountains, from which matter and energy rejected by a higher universe flow in endless cataract into this one. If you pass—if our race is judged ready to reenter the wide seas of space—such a white fountain will be created in the heart of our sun. (*Citadel*, 364)

So the projection of Master Malrubius explains to Severian, a nebulous description of its origin that ends with the conditions of its desired usage. Additionally it is marked as a boon, a gift to be allowed from him by whom “our race is judged,” namely the Hierogrammate Tzadkiel. Tzadkiel and his kin are powerful, but is the engineering of such a galactic spectacle theirs to initiate and then transfer? Referring to one of the dream episodes occurring in *The Shadow of the Torturer*, Peter Wright divorces Severian’s agency from the question:

As the Hierogrammates’ marionette, Severian is powerless to oppose their schemes, even if he understood them fully, and his relative impotence is suggested by the description of his puppet counterpart as a “dust mote in a sunbeam.” Severian is just such a speck, caught in the swirling events that bring the White Fountain, like a sunbeam, into the heart of the old sun. His inability to gauge his role in the Hierogrammates’ strategies, and his own

self-importance, are mocked at the conclusion of the puppets' battle when his analogue's empty victory over "the man of sticks" is celebrated with a derisive "flourish of toy trumpets." (78)

Expanding his theory on the eugenic conspiracy of the Hierogrammates, Wright paints the White Fountain as a device, a boon, that these beings may employ and bestow at will through their advanced technology. Severian only fits in because of his ideal biology, the human genetic material that will be required to sustain the Hierogrammates, and his pseudo-religious quest and journey of personal growth is bleakly reduced to an image of a pawn moving across a chessboard towards a sacrificial maneuver.

To move beyond this interpretation evokes Joseph Campbell's mythological theory regarding the "World Navel," a concept that forms "...the symbol of the continuous creation: the mystery of the maintenance of the world through that continuous miracle of vivification which wells within all things" (32). The White Fountain is certainly that, a surging force of light, life, and energy that in its union with a weakening sun might be said to provide "maintenance" to the ultimate source of vitality for the planet Urth. Applying this theory to the White Fountain however would acknowledge that "miracle of vivification which wells within all things," in direct opposition to Wright's theory based on the fictional and highly advanced scientific knowledge that could create spontaneously a massive galactic occurrence. Campbell continues by describing the release of this energy at the successful conclusion of a hero's journey:

The torrent pours from an invisible source, the point of entry being the center of the symbolic circle of the universe, the Immovable Spot of the Buddha legend, around which the world may be said to revolve...The tree

of life, i.e., the universe itself, grows from this point. It is rooted in the supporting darkness; the golden sun bird perches on its peak; a spring, the inexhaustible well, bubbles at its foot. (32)

Combining with the sun, “the center of the symbolic universe,” the White Fountain murmurs an endless spring at the feet of a “golden sun bird,” which roosts commandingly atop the crest of life energy supported in the wide night of outer space. The winged creature may seem to be the master of this force, and while it does hold rightly an importance, it is ultimately a herald for something greater than itself.

Following his escape from imprisonment in *The Claw of the Conciliator*, Severian comes across a short, bald, androgynous figure amidst a secret chamber of the House Absolute concealed by convoluted veils. Because Thecla’s mind and memories at this point are also Severian’s own, he recognizes this figure robed in yellow as none other than the Autarch. The ruler of the Commonwealth compels Severian to peer into a massive tome with pages like silvered glass, and an image is revealed to him:

As he spoke, something shaped itself in shining air above the open pages. It was neither a woman nor a butterfly, but it partook of both, and just as we know when we look at the painted figure of a mountain in the background of some picture that it is in reality as huge as an island, so I knew that I saw the thing only from far off—its wings beat, I think, against the proton winds of space, and all Urth might have been a mote disturbed by their motion. Then as I had seen it, so it saw me...It paused and turned to me and opened its wings that I might observe them. They were marked with eyes. (*Claw*, 336)

It is not until *The Urth of the New Sun* that this entity is revealed to be none other than Tzadkiel, assuming one shape of sex and form among many that he may choose at will. A beast of ethereal flight already then soars through the great sky of space, anticipating its ivory perch on a burgeoning fountain. It is the effect of this image on Severian's countenance however that asserts his indisputable role, manipulative plots notwithstanding, in the creation and application of the White Fountain, for the Autarch "...handed me a clean cloth as he spoke, and I wiped my brow with it as he told me, because I could feel the moisture running down my face. When I looked at the cloth, it was crimson with blood" (*Claw*, 337). In meeting with a king and witnessing an emanation of great spiritual portent, Severian is adorned his own crown of thorns and blood flows from the top of his head. It is one of the more overt comparisons Wolfe makes to Christ using Severian, and returning to Campbell's explanation of the "World Navel" the importance of this imagery here is observed as "...the figure [previously the sun bird] may be that of the cosmic man or woman...seated or standing on this spot, or even fixed to the tree [tree of life] (Attis, Jesus, Wotan); for the hero as the incarnation of God is himself the navel of the world, the umbilical point through which the energies of eternity break into time" (32). Recalling Wright's own words about the importance of blood regarding the Claw of the Conciliator and the workings of the extraordinary, here is illustrated Severian's individual significance before becoming Autarch, before judgment by the Hierogrammates, his dripping red life an indication of the independent divinity of the Conciliator.

Wright's claims are continually brought back to the manipulative plan of the Hierogrammates, a plan that is vague and only briefly explained in *The Urth of the New*

Sun. Severian attempts to articulate the goal of this plan to Gunnie, a woman who arrived with him on Yesod, yet he has trouble doing so, remarking that “The Hierarchs and their Hierodules—and the Hierogrammates too—have been trying to let us become what we were. What we can be....That’s their justice, their whole reason for being. They bring us through the pain we brought them through” (*Urth*, 159). This explanation expresses the notion that human beings will be brought through a process that will return them to the superior state of their race formerly expressed before Urth regressed, the evidence of greater men already surrounding Severian and those of his generation through the relics of achievements only an interstellar civilization could have hoped to gain. Apheta is present to listen to Severian’s conversation, and she responds with remarks of her own that provide further clarity:

You in turn will make us go through what you did. I think you understand...Your race and ours are, perhaps, no more than each other’s reproductive mechanisms. You [Gunnie] are a woman, and so you say you produce your ovum so that there will someday be another woman. But your ovum would say it produces that woman so that someday there will be another ovum. We have wanted the New Sun to succeed as badly as he [Severian] has wanted to himself. More urgently, in all truth. In saving your race he has saved ours; as we have saved ours of the future by saving yours. (*Urth*, 159-60)

Apheta’s comment about human beings and the Hierogrammates sharing a relationship akin to “reproductive mechanisms” becomes especially relevant, and her further comparison between the woman and her ovum is enlightening in the fact that it betrays

the Hierogrammate psychology of the ends proving far more important than the means. This being said, the “ends” being described are not the immediate salvation of Apheta and Tzadkiel, the living generation of Hierogrammates, but the guarantee of a future for the entirety of their race, as well as that of human beings. Describing the ideology in this way lends an additional perspective to the consequences of the coming of the New Sun as well, for it is an aspiration for the greater good. The Hierogrammates and Severian, in addition to the common people of Urth, are aware that many will die with the birth of a New Sun and that Urth will be flooded and renewed through destruction, yet they justify this massive loss of life with what is depicted as the moral high ground. Regarding the Hierogrammates, Wright continues to see their plans as straightforward and selfish:

Their apparently altruistic actions towards humanity, their granting of the boon of the New Sun, must be recognized as a Hierogrammate means to a Hierogrammate end; the (comparatively) short-term benefits conferred on *Homo sapiens* who, in all probability, will be destroyed together with the old universe, are merely the by-products of the Hierogrammates’ determination to ensure their own biological ascent. (72)

The fact is, simply, that there is no probability or likelihood of complete human annihilation, as the New Sun arrives as planned and humanity continues, albeit depleted and in a more primitive fashion. The old sun had to be violently revived through the White Fountain, and the Urth of the old sun was destroyed as a result, yet the outcome is an Urth under the New Sun, an Urth that may continue. If the old sun had been allowed to sputter into galactic embers, the old Urth would have perished without hope for resurrection, bringing about what would have been the true end of humanity.

Returning to the allusion Apheta made to the sexual congruency of humanity and the Hierogrammates, the creation of the White Fountain is remarkable. Wright has asserted that the phenomenon is a boon to be granted through the power of Tzadkiel, yet Wolfe's description of its forming is framed in a far different setting, that of Apheta's bedchamber:

Her hands, her lips, her eyes, the breasts I pressed—all wondrous; but there was more, perhaps the perfume of her hair. I felt that I breathed an endless night...Lying upon my back, I entered Yesod. Or say, rather, Yesod closed about me. It was only then that I knew I had never been there. Stars in their billions spurted from me, fountains of suns, so that for an instant I felt I knew how universes are born. All folly. Reality displaced it, the kindling of the torch that whips shadows to their corners, and with them all the winged fays of fancy. There was something born between Yesod and BriaH when I met with Apheta upon that divan in that circling room, something tiny yet immense that burned like a coal conveyed to the tongue by tongs. That something was myself. (*Urth*, 145)

BriaH being the universe in which Urth resides, what Severian feels so intimately as his own being, what is born between one universe and that of Yesod is the White Fountain. Severian describes as “folly” the notion that he understands how universes are born, and this is true, for what is born is not a universe but a galactic seed bearing life, and it must be couched within a solar womb. In his examination of an Irish myth, Campbell states:

The bringing together of the two great symbols of the meeting with the goddess [here Apheta] and the fire theft [White Fountain] reveals with

simplicity and clarity the status of the anthropomorphic powers in the realm of myth. They are not ends in themselves, but guardians, embodiments, or bestowers, of the liquor, the milk, the food, the fire, the grace, of indestructible life. (149)

Apheta as mother-goddess here evokes an image of the Virgin Mary, in being a necessary vessel for the force of “indestructible life.” The Christian imagery is relevant here as Severian playing the role of Father in creating this force of life is also the Son, for by his own admission what is produced from his union with Apheta is also himself. With Wright’s argument in mind in relation to the above quote from Campbell one might connect the “bestowers” here with the Hierogrammates, granting them superiority in the exchange and causing this creation to be primarily their responsibility. However, with Severian finding himself in the White Fountain, there is no “bestowal” enacted at all, for the force of life that Severian gains from the universe of Yesod is merely himself, the essence of his life made manifest in galactic scale. As the Conciliator, Severian negotiates this essence, this power from a higher world to rejuvenate his own, beholden only to his own will and means.

By offering a solution to *The Book of the New Sun* that bestows on Gene Wolfe the role of a willful deceiver, the engineer of a puzzle solved only for its own sake, Peter Wright diminishes what the work does accomplish and points to a conclusion that is wholly dissatisfying. Wright claims:

It is only by observing how he or she has been deceived and cajoled that the reader comes to appreciate more fully Wolfe’s vision of humanity as a helplessly subjective species dependent on the whim of manipulatory

forces. That reader, in turn, may then recognize his or her position in an analogous system. (167)

Here the use of archaic vocabulary and the structure of a plot that shows more than it tells are downgraded to devices of deception, tools to alter the reading experience and, if they are further examined through Wright's lens, may just show that reader that their own reality is false and wrought with misunderstanding. The crux of this argument circles back to the machinations of the Hierogrammates, beings whose goals are actually aligned with Severian's own. While it is eventually revealed that they had an influence "Above and beyond the 'stage' of the narrative's plot...played out on Urth," (70), the argument for their malevolent interference is based on insubstantial, conjectural claims. This argument also denies the mythological thrust of *The Book of the New Sun*, its utilization of symbols that hold a significant connection with the historical human psyche. Joseph Campbell writes about how interwoven these symbols are with the human consciousness, and because of this relationship the strength and at times intimidating nature of these symbols:

The unconscious sends all sorts of vapors, odd beings, terrors, and deluding images up into the mind—whether in dream, broad daylight, or insanity; for the human kingdom, beneath the floor of the comparatively neat little dwelling that we call our consciousness, goes down into unsuspected Aladdin caves. There not only jewels but also dangerous jinn abide: the inconvenient or resisted psychological powers that we have not thought or dared to integrate into our lives. And they may remain unsuspected, or, on the other hand, some chance word...may touch a

magic spring, and then dangerous messengers begin to appear in the brain. These are dangerous because they threaten the fabric of the security into which we have built ourselves and our family. But they are fiendishly fascinating too, for they carry keys that open the whole realm of the desired and feared adventure of the discovery of the self. Destruction of the world that we have built and in which we live, and of ourselves within it; but then a wonderful reconstruction, of the bolder, cleaner, more spacious, and fully human life—that is the lure, the promise and terror, of these disturbing night visitants from the mythological realm that we carry within. (5)

A disturbing vision Wolfe certainly depicts, a sympathetic torturer who from his youth knows little more than death and the destruction of the human body is chosen as the hero of this myth. Severian's conciliation with entities a universe removed is frightening in its scope, with the drowning of the world the goal of this negotiation these beings cannot help but inspire fear and awe. In the security of logic one might hope to work through this feeling and arrive at a conclusion that firmly situates the fearsome "other" as an enemy, a cold and aloof manipulator drawing the puppet-strings of an already blemished hero towards an end that is wholly tragic. However, as Severian himself comes to realize, the navigation of these fiendishly captivating symbols is a journey that returns to the self. It is a destruction of the barriers that surround the self, a dismantling that is painful and terrifying, yet it ultimately leads to an individual understanding that is greater for the challenges it was forced to undergo.

Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* is a significant work that has seen little examination in the decades following its publication, yet the importance and effectiveness of what the text accomplishes is abundantly clear to the curious reader. Wolfe crafts a sophisticated mythology that takes the ancient symbols and archetypes of mankind and flings them far into the future, testing the endurance of these devices in a fantastic setting that calls into question the relevance of images first established in ages past. What is revealed is that these images have indeed endured, the twisting and complex narrative serving not to diminish what has been evoked but to enhance it, the unique and erudite diction Wolfe employs not obfuscating but validating. *The Book of the New Sun* is simply a beautiful and subtle work that stands boldly in its own literary corner. It incorporates motifs and themes of literature that has come before yet its approach is bravely uncommon. A lesser writer might have struggled with such a volatile creation, but Gene Wolfe performs with cool facility in the crafting of a narrative whose intelligence is willing to trust in the reader's own.

Appendix: Summary of *The Book of the New Sun*

The Shadow of the Torturer begins the narrative of Severian, a man born and raised among the Order of Seekers for Truth and Penitence, a title that the vernacular of his day converts into the “guild of torturers.” His childhood is marked by portentous meetings and dream-like events that seem to have stepped outside of the boundaries of time, culminating in his brief romance with the Chatelaine Thecla, a woman imprisoned by the torturers at the behest of the Autarch, the supreme ruler of the Commonwealth. Unable to bear her agony Severian offers Thecla a swift suicide, and as a result he is exiled from his brotherhood, banished north to Thrax bearing the grand sword *Terminus Est* to serve as his judicial arm. Severian becomes involved in plots of intrigue, dramatic productions, and religious mystery while passing through the sweeping city of Nessus, and it is here that he unknowingly obtains the Claw of the Conciliator from the visiting order of Pelerines. While preparing to face a challenger in a duel at sunset, Severian raises a young woman named Dorcas from the murky depths of a funerary lake, and she cleaves to him with an ethereal desperation. Severian duels the challenger, the fighters dancing back and forth to avoid the poisoned razor-leaves of the avern plant they battle with, and Severian is mortally wounded, only to miraculously rise seemingly unharmed. Severian performs an execution shortly after and prepares to continue his journey with Dorcas, the two stopping to marvel at a vision of a burning cathedral hovering over Nessus, the “City Imperishable.” Severian and Dorcas reunite with characters previously lost, and the novel concludes with passage through the Piteous Gate.

The Claw of the Conciliator finds Severian continuing his quest, separated from Dorcas and the group of actors who have journeyed with them. Severian is in the village of Saltus to perform several executions, accompanied by the half-mechanical man Jonas. A festival is underway in Saltus to coincide with the ceremonious executions, and here Severian encounters an old antagonist and a mysterious “green man”. Severian sets the “green man” free from his chains, and he leaves the torturer with bewildering remarks about an Urth that enjoys the light of the New Sun. Severian performs the executions and is led astray by a letter that has been forged to disturb him, the letter leading him through an abandoned mine where the miraculous light of the Claw is displayed. The agents of the revolutionary Vodalus soon after apprehend Severian and Jonas, and a grotesque and symbolic corpse ritual is performed that unites the memories and essence of Thecla with Severian, the two becoming one. Severian and Jonas journey to the House Absolute, fleeing horrid entities from across the stars along the way, and resurrecting a patrolman suffocated by the interstellar darkness. Imprisoned within the high seat of governance, Thecla’s memories lead Severian to an escape that offers Jonas another way out, a pathway between reflecting mirrors that will return him to the wide seas of space. Roaming alone through the House Absolue Severian meets unique attendants and a familiar artist, eventually coming to the Autarch himself, this figure concealed by walls and doors crafted to trick the untrained eye. The Autarch shows Severian a vision, and reunites him with Dorcas and the troupe of theater performers. The play “Eschatology and Genesis” is performed verbatim for the court of royals and guests not from Urth, ending with panic and gunfire. Alone again, Severian and Dorcas conclude the second

novel with a phantasmagoric event in a derelict stone town, communing with witches, a Badger, and the memories of an indigenous civilization.

The Sword of the Lictor sees Severian already appointed and situated in Thrax, living with Dorcas as lictor and leman in this “City of Windowless Rooms.” Dorcas has become depressed and aware of forgotten memories, Severian distraught with uncertainty while he uses the Claw to aid a sickly boy and his sister, later attending a masquerade disguised only as himself. Severian again shows mercy to a woman he was to throw from a great height, forcing him to flee his post and the city. Briefly encountering a creature of fire Severian returns to Dorcas, who explains she will return south, while Severian will head into the mountains farther north. Cold and starving Severian braves the carved mountains that bear regal countenance, bringing him to the cabin of Casdoe and her son, a child also named Severian. An encounter with a beast that may speak as a daughter or a husband compels Severian to become the father of the boy of his namesake, and the two brave a steaming rainforest inhabited by hostile sorcerers with painted faces. Following this encounter and its trials, the two Severians brave the foreboding mountain range. They climb the tallest of the peaks shaped in the likeness of a ruler long dead, and reaching the golden ring at his hand little Severian is burnt and killed, leaving the childless father to huddle emaciated and weak next to a two-headed corpse. The corpse arises and is named Typhon, former emperor of Urth, who tempts Severian with wine and feast if he will swear fealty to him on the Claw. Severian overcomes temptation, descends the mountain and comes to a lakeside village. Here he is fed and respected, then drugged and imprisoned. Coming to understand these peoples fear, and passionately seeking the Claw that had been taken from him, Severian leads the lake people to the looming castle

where a giant and his attendant reign. These two are none other than the playwrights with whom Severian is acquainted, and Severian finds not only they but three Hierodules descending from their craft that mounts the spires of the edifice. These beings speak with incredible foreknowledge of Severian's future, compelling the giant to throw the Claw from the rain soaked parapets. Severian attacks the giant, leading to the destruction of *Terminus Est* and the sinking of the giant beneath the waters below, leaving Severian to frantically search for the relic of the Conciliator. It is found among broken blue shards, the remains of what was revealed to be only its luminous shell. Severian continues north with renewed resolve.

The Citadel of the Autarch opens with an unarmed Severian traversing the borders of the raging war, coming across a dead soldier, the now bare Claw restoring life to him. Severian and his mute new companion stumble through the jungle together, coming down with fever and arriving at a lazaret of the sick and wounded, established by the Pelerines. Severian spends weeks in bed, wounded from his battle, sick and exhausted from his long journey and periods of starvation. While Severian is in the company of his bedmates, soldiers of the Commonwealth and a prisoner of the opposing Ascians, four stories are told to win the fancy of the woman soldier among them. Between the symbolic tales, the soldier Severian revived, now calling himself Miles, comes to speak with his savior and to announce his departure. Severian is certain this man is Jonas come again, returned from the stars wholly human once more. The stories told and Severian recovered, he at last restores the Claw to the altar the Pelerines have erected at the lazaret, euphoric at having accomplished this goal. Severian is asked by a Pelerine who watched him to journey to a known hermit whose home is within the fast closing jaws of the mouth of

war, and following a map through an impossibly morphing terrain Severian finds Master Ash. Ash's house is separated into stories that exist in different eras of time, eras Ash has been watching closely. Severian is forced to drag Ash unwilling from his home, yet soon after leaving the doorway the man and the house fade into nothing. Aimless Severian joins a militia he comes across, fighting a hellish battle and crippling his leg, which will never fully heal. Bloody and broken on the field Severian is rescued by the Autarch, who shares hidden knowledge. Severian swallows the elixir around the Autarch's neck, and performs the hated corpse rite. Severian assumes the memories of this Autarch, and thereby all of the memories and personas of the Autarchs of history, a thousand men and women joining him and Thecla in a single body. Severian becomes the ruler of the Commonwealth, and after a few brief episodes in which he revisits his guild and his old friends, a revelation of his true parentage, and a furtive glance at Dorcas among the ruins of her past life, her true self now known, Severian "backs into the throne" to reign.

The Urth of the New Sun occurs ten years after Severian's retelling of his journey in becoming Autarch, and the Severian writing this novel aboard a massive spacecraft, adrift in a space straddling dimensions and time, may not be the same one as before. At the behest of spiritual visions preceding his Autarchy, of a three-legged dog from his youth and a deceased master torturer, Severian travels to Yesod where humanity through him will be judged worthy or unworthy of receiving a New Sun. If Severian fails, as previous Autarchs have, he will be castrated, and he will return to rule a Commonwealth with an uncertain future. Aboard the ship Severian is accompanied by the three Hierodules, people and other beings from across the galaxies, and a strange animal creature called Zak. Through the conflict and resolution revolving around assassination attempts on

Severian, the subduing of rogue crew members, and a fall that seems to lead to Severian's death, Zak continuously evolves until it is revealed that this creature was only a form chosen by the powerful Hierogrammate Tzadkiel. Eventually the ship reaches Yesod, where Tzadkiel assumes the position of judge in a resplendent and angelic figure. It is revealed that Tzadkiel and his kind want to see Severian succeed as much as he himself does, as the Hierogrammates are dependent on human biology to sustain their own lives and evolve. Severian is tried with vivified figures of characters he has met throughout *The Book of the New Sun*, some friends and some foes. Throughout Severian is attended by the Hierogrammate Apeta, who guides him through the alien world and offers him shelter. Their coupling produces the White Fountain, the galactic phenomenon by which the old sun will be rejuvenated. Severian is deemed worthy and he returns to Urth, but the Urth he returns to is one in a time centuries before Severian's own. Here Severian lives the life of the Conciliator, drawing from the power of the White Fountain to establish the mythology he had only heard of through his miraculous deeds of resurrection and healing. Imprisoned by the living Typhon of this time, Severian escapes through the Corridors of Time with Tzadkiel's aid, returning to his own time hours before the coming deluge and the era of the New Sun. The flood comes and with it destruction. Severian steps back through time once more to foster the primitive civilization of the stone town visited at the end of the second volume. Here he learns that after his fall on the ship his physical body indeed perished, and he has been living as an aquastor, a spirit like those that have visited him before, ever since. Severian moves forward in time again to the time of the New Sun after the flood, and finds a new mythology born of the anthropomorphized deities of himself and the survivors of the flood.

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