

## THE CONTRASTS in The Garden of Endless Sleep

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The literary device of contrasts built as a framework in the Botanic Garden episodes in *The Shadow of the Torturer* by Gene Wolfe. Although numerous structural contrasts appear preceding the episode in the Garden of Endless Sleep, they are numbered only in that section, (chapters 19-24 of TSOT).

### Contrast as a topic in literary criticism

To be considered a classic a work of fiction must have, besides high quality prose and relevance to universal human values, a particular unique character. The work of Gene Wolfe satisfies these criteria in more than one way. For one thing, the language, most notably of *The Shadow of the Torturer* is the prose equivalent of the poetry of Shakespeare's sonnets. The ambiguities Wolfe's novels cultivate has often been discussed, but the fact is that many of these enigmas, in fact, present a very solid substructure underlying a story, and this is one of the distinctive marks of his fiction. *The Shadow of the Torturer* (TBONS), especially, shows an intriguing and almost mechanically assembled framework, the interweaving of **counterpoised contrasts** between elements of the narrative. The skill with which Gene Wolfe employs this literary device is a precise indication of his eminence as a novelists.

**Contraries**, antipodes and dialectics abound in life: life and death, day and night, win or lose, man and woman, yin and yang, child and adult, man and beast, rich and poor, pain and pleasure, hot and cold, and so on. As for fiction, without contrasts there is simply no story. **Antitheticals** are just as essential in art and science, for example: major and minor keys, fast or slow movements, primary and secondary themes—in music; light and dark, colors and textures, large and small, straight and curved in art; experiments and control experiments, negative and positive charges, monopole and dipole, binary numbers, sensitivity to contrast by receptors of visual perception, time and space—in science; Plato's two worlds, mind and body dualism, free will and determinism, dialectics—in philosophy; Father and Son, heaven and hell, I-and-Thou, Shiva and Shakti, guest and host, Dvaita and Advaita—in religions, and so on. In all genres of literature, even in those for the youngest children, there is the initial setting and the counterpoised ending, an important change in perspective. The punch lines in jokes are basically the *counterposition* of the expected and the eventual.

The strong feeling and need we have for contrasts is reflected in speech. English has at least twenty-six synonyms for "but", that is, conjunctions, prepositions and adverbs to express counterpositions: "albeit, all the same, although, at all events, at any rate, be that as it may, despite, even then, except that, howbeit, however, if not, in any case, in spite of, just the same, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, on the other hand, regardless, save, still, though, unless, were it not, yet", but only six synonyms for "and", namely "additionally, in addition, along with, also, as well, plus, with".

The following is a detailed account of how Gene Wolfe's employment of **contrasts** reaches an exceptional level of mastery in the chapters centered the visit to the Botanic Garden. There are no less than **twenty-six** major plus **sixteen** lesser, or altogether **forty-two** important contrastive elements in this episode, occurring both as actions and as images, built into a framework that actually forms a geometrical structure. I believe

this material has never been described, and I hope it will give more evidence of GW's enormous talents. These structures are shown in **diagrams on page 000**.

### **The Botanic Gardens—preliminary contrasts**

This set of chapters is so rich in small and large mysteries, hidden clues, allusions, philosophical statements and **structural framing** that one cannot be certain to what degree GW consciously created these elements, but even if all or only some of them have been unintentionally generated, that fact in itself is a sign of genius, an inborn mastery recognized in persons like Mozart.

Severian and his recently met companion, Agia are the initial actors in the Botanic Garden episode. Three others enter later on. Agia is bringing Severian to the Gardens to acquire the "avern", the plant to be used as a weapon in the death-and-life gladiatorial combat he has been challenged to.

Surprisingly this place is not only a set of gardens and green houses, as expected, but also contains biospheres with strange qualities. Seeing it as he approaches it, Severian describes it as tholus-shaped, that is, a circular dome, a name derived from a type of ancient Greek ceremonial tomb. Any extinct volcano on Mars is also called "tholus" in planetary science. Here GW brings in with a single word not only a visually description, but both a tradition for the preservation of the dead, and the image of a volcano, two topics intricately tied in with the visit to these Gardens. The corridors and walls within the building are made of thick glass, through which things on the other side appear only as vague shapes, an idea which seems to allude ambiguities and illusions in the nature of things. A total of **seven** worlds or biospheres of the Gardens are mentioned, those, respectively, of Delectation, of Antiquities and of Pantomime, as well as the Sand Garden, the Jungle Garden and the Garden of Endless Sleep. Severian also notices a door to a Garden of Sleep but the story does not deal with it.

Agia is intent on taking Severian to collect the avern plant after a short visit to the Garden of Delectations. Here we meet at least two **opposites**: the contrast between temporary pleasure and impending death, as well as Agia's deceitfulness coupled with a suggestion of youthful romance and eroticism. However, that the two never enter this site abides well with the basically gloomy and forbidding nature of the entire visit.

### **The Sand Garden**

For reason not given Severian prefers to look in at the Sand Garden, which turns out to be a desert of rock and sand, empty of life but for one thorny plant. He finds it hard to leave and feels he has spent but a short time here, although, according to Agia they have stayed for a long while. In fact, GW only assigns three short paragraphs for this event. This place may suggest **two different contrastive** states: a world before creation of life, and hence lacking the concept of time, and the unwillingness to leave seems like the nonexistence of memory, and a wish to remain "uncreated", in a state of peace, and not to enter the turbulent world. This first meeting with the thorny bush stands in parallel and in **opposition** to the time when Severian visits the Sand Garden a second time, and its identity is clearly revealed there.

### **The Jungle Garden**

Next, Severian, again **countering** Agia's will, chooses to enter the Jungle Garden. In this biosphere of a true tropical jungle they hear the roar of a distant sabre-tooth before sighting a house built on stilts and climb up to look inside. They see a white man and woman, named Roger and Marie, who appear to us like Christian missionaries, and a

native man. In this odd scene the woman and native seem to disagree on religious matters, where the woman is reading about Moses from the Old Testament, and the Isangoma, the native speaks of the power of his god, and of the presence of *tokoloshe*, which, when referenced, turn out to be creatures in Zulu myth, sometimes human, sometimes zombies or sprites of generally evil intent. The man, looking out through a window, as if awaiting something, occasionally glances in the direction of Severian and Agia, yet does not seem to see them, and he agrees with the native in saying that the tokoloshe are indeed present, as opposed to the benevolent spirit of Judeo-Christianity championed by the woman. It appears that both Isangoma and Robert sense the two visitors as being the evil spirits. Here seems to be a **contradiction** between the religion of the jungle and of the urban mind, although Robert appears cognizant of both. This episode is complex enough to deserve a more careful analysis. GW's purpose for writing this chapter is unclear, but it does fit into the train of narrative **contrasts**: the desert as against the jungle, one empty and without threat, the other one overgrown and ominous. The words "Isangoma", the word for Zulu spiritual healer and "tokoloshe" add significant color to this section: would "witch doctor" or "shaman and "sprite", "zombie", "elf" or "ghost" sound more musical and would they capture our attention more?

### **Contrasts in the Jungle Garden chapter:**

In this episode we can find at least **eight** counterpositions:

1. People, rather than wilderness: one might have expected jaguars and anacondas. **Instead**, apart from voice of a smilodon in the distance, the players in this scene are human beings within the confines of a small bamboo house erected on stilts.
2. There is an **antithesis** noted by Severian as he compares the flimsiness of this structure with the stability of the torturers' tower.
3. First stepping into the steamy Jungle Garden Severian sees a dead tree fallen across the path, with the name, *Caesalpina sappan* tagged on it. Although this particular tree is rotten, it is otherwise a plant which yields a medicinal substance and this detail presents two ambiguously meaningful **contrasts**: a mix of decay and healing in the form of an obstacle which Severian must pass over. Life and death intertwined are similarly symbolized by Wolfe in his much discussed short story *A Solar Labyrinth*, as the dead tree on which roses grow. The rose is a Christian icon, white roses represent resurrection and red are for martyrdom, so in this case the tree may stand for the cross and the roses for both the crown of thorns and for resurrection.
4. The basis for the disagreement between the husband and wife over is not clear, but involves religious and practical matters: a) white versus native; b) Judeo-Christianity facing a native creed.
5. There is the question of whether the husband and the native actually sense the presence of the visitors while the wife does not.
6. Severian's interest in observing the scene opposes Agia's disinterest.
7. There is an antithesis between the time of the narrative and the 20th century, since the couple mention Paris and a mail plane's arrival.
8. We may picture a subsurface parallel where the trio of the white couple may appear as Adam and Eve and the *tokoloshe* as the devil, which in this case seem to be Severian and Agia since Isangoma's, i.e., the native's "singsong held a note of triumph" as the two leave the scene. Isangoma, chanting the praise of his god, then, may represent the angel.

A note on the **contraries** found in the times and places set in the Botanic Garden episode up to this point: the Botanic Gardens are in the city of Nessus but the experiences in its biospheres transport to very different, **contrasting** environments. The time

and place of the Sand Garden is undefined, the Jungle Garden seems to open on a scene in the tropics typical with missionaries in the 19th century, but the appearance of a propeller airplane confounds this notion, and at the same time, Severian observes all this in his own time.

Following the surrealistic scene in the jungle, and with time running out, Agia hastens Severian to the Garden of Endless Sleep, where the avern plant is to be gathered. The very appellation of that site speaks of death. Note that there is also a Garden of (plain) Sleep. We do not know the reason for Wolfe's **contraposing** these two names, but it may be a reminder of the difference between those two kinds of sleep.

#### **A detail on a special touch—the elegance of courtesy and of brevity**

GW's writing is more often than not indirect and understating but it is also more often than not decorous and noble. One example of that special touch appears in this section. Severian describes the route to the Garden of Endless Sleep as a path of "seemingly endless sinuosities", an element reminiscent of the labyrinths of Borges, and recounts the entrance by the two with uncommon elegance: "Agia had already taken a step past the door when I shifted *Terminus Est* [the sword] to the other hand and opened it for her". An unexpected detail! The changing of hands in order to reach out to extend a courtesy, rather than as a writer of lesser art would say "we opened the door and stepped into the garden." Including this seemingly unimportant event must be a reflection of Wolfe personal nature. This little scene also asks: why did Agia go past the place she was so eager to reach? Has her memory failed as it did for Severian in the Sand Garden? Or did some benevolent power attempt to misguide her from leading Severian on a path towards his likely death in the arena? Why switch the executioner's sword *Terminus Est* from right to left hand? The left hand can just as easily open the door. The sword is a prominent element in this quadrilogy as much as in many other stories of GW, and this motive sometimes appears as staff with or without a crossbar, in both cases easily understood as the symbols of the Christian cross. Could emphasis on changing of the grip stand for a symbolic **contrast** once more, between the sinister and the dexter, and for an interchangeability of life and death?

#### **Going to the Botanic Garden**

This episode, in which the use of **contrasts** reaches an extraordinarily virtuosic level, consisting of a serially consecutive line of contrasts implanted in the row of the events, begins when Severian and Agia, after their fateful collision with the Pelerines, descend on the Adamnian Steps, a walk popular with lovers, which in a way seems appropriate here, for although Agia is intent on having Severian killed, their relationship at this time is also romantic. Two **contradictions** are hidden here. **First**, "*Adamnian*" refers to Adamnan (or Adomnan) the abbot who in the 7th century A.D. promulgated laws to exempt the clergy, women and children from having to bear arms, (as noted in Michael Andre-Driussi's *Lexicon Urthus*) and **second**, the ambiance of a lovers' lane is far removed from war, but in this case, the present couple is going to gather the poisonous plant, the avern, to employ it in gladiatorial combat.

#### **In the Garden of Endless Sleep**

##### **Contrasts 1: the expected *versus* the actual**

Rather than simply writing that the Garden of Endless Sleep was a misty, cold marsh land, "a dark lake in an infinite fen", Wolfe has Severian express this in the form of a

contrast: he had expected it to be garden with trellises on which the avern plants grew. There is also set of **counterpoints** here between the three places so far visited: a silent desert, a torrid jungle, and now a watery mire of some colder climate.

### **Contrast 2: appearance versus reality**

The place appears uninhabited until they hear a voice and observe over the top of some vegetation an old man approaching. Instead of saying that this man came into the scene rowing a small skiff, GW writes how the head and upper body of this old man initially appears over a clump of reeds, seemingly a person walking with a staff that later turns out to be the pole with which he is pushing his boat.

### **Contrast 3: searched but not found**

Agia had previously informed Severian that bodies weighted down with lead and submerged in the acidic water of this biosphere remain preserved and can so be retrieved. The old man, coming into the scene, contradicts her. He has been searching for the body of his wife, who, as is the custom here, on her death as a young woman was interred in the lake, but that although weighted down, his wife's body has been displaced and that even having her original location recorded on a map, in all the years he has not succeeded. This is an **opposition** between the expected and the actual. The event also recalls the preservation of the prehistoric mummified bodies found in the bogs of Northern Europe. Asked to row Agia and Severian across the lake, the old man tells them that his boat is too small, but that there is another person nearby with a bigger boat able to ferry them.

### **Charon the ferryman of the dead—a parallel**

The image of a boat in watery locale connected with the dead alludes to the mythological boatmen who transport the deceased across the waters that divide life and death. Charon and the river Styx of Greek mythology and its representations in art, like the painting *The Isle of the Dead* by Arnold Böcklin which was also translated into the music as the symphonic poem of the same title by Sergei Rachmaninoff, and just as much the *Swan of Tuonela* by Jean Sibelius come to mind. Another important structural linking involving water in the Botanic Garden with Roman and Christian traditions of hell will be brought up later.

### **Contrast 4: the unmoveable is moved**

This dislocation is an antithesis. What is deliberately anchored still moves. The old man's explanation is that the bodies get dislocated by a current with which they can drift and go out through the conduit that fills this artificial lake. We can note a suggestion of an underlying dynamism underneath a seemingly still surface, like the swirling molten rock deep in the earth, or the enormous deep waves of the oceans or even the revolution of galaxies. The same theme of dark subsurface undercurrents is displayed in the *Acies* episode, see below.

### **Contrast 5: the named and the unnamed**

An odd **contrast** here: the old man is not named by Wolfe, who otherwise gives his characters names that carry much meaning. This may not be an accident. This old man remains anonymous even as he reappears much later in the story. His own namelessness harmonizes with the barrenness of this marshland and with the anonymity of the submerged bodies. Yet this stands **opposed** to the fact that he volunteers to call his departed wife Cas. Hers is the single name revealed among all the other deceased there.

A **parallel** can be also be found when the old man, who is small, "bowed and shrunken with age", in talking about the lake, speaks of having seen Father Inire, the

Autarch's wizard, who "is just a little man... with wry neck and bowed legs". Since a possible association of Father Inire's name with Jesus Christ is covered in the section on **Names** in **ESSAY?!?!!**, and God is ultimately unnamable it is interesting that GW brings up the great wizard in the recollection by the old man. The similarity in appearance of these two elders is curious as well.

At this point a small but significant detail in the plot, something that can be considered as **contrast 5a** turns up. The old man deliberately exhibits to Severian a document recording biographical information about himself and his wife, and Severian places emphasis on this by saying: "I only (pretended) ...to glance at (it), I am afraid". Had he read the lines he could have later solved the mystery of Dorcas' identity. She is the woman who comes on the stage next after they leave the old man—is she the person sought by him?

#### **Contrast 6: one man ferries, the other one does not**

When Severian asks the old man to ferry them across the lake, the latter indicates that he cannot due to the smallness of his boat and directs them to another man in the vicinity, whom he does not name. This is another **antithesis**. There are two persons with boats, but only one of them is able to take the protagonists across the lake to where the averns are growing. Could GW have not just assigned a bigger boat to the old man? Conceivably, but in that case the entry into the story by Hildegrin, the other boatman, would have been accomplished differently.

#### **Contrast 7: the good and the bad in simultaneity**

A kindly intention arising here causes Severian to nearly drown when he, wishing to assist Agia, for whom he feels sorry for having walked a great deal with a painfully wrenched leg, slips and falls into the freezing water. A good deed leads to one not so good.

#### **Contrast 8: the two hands—death and salvation**

Beneath the frigid waters Severian feels he is drowning (as he almost did in a structural parallel at the beginning of the novel), and also loses *Terminus Est*, his treasured sword. He finds the weapon caught in the tangle of submerged roots, throws it from the water, but at that moment feels a hand pulling him down! When with his last bit of strength he surfaces once more, he finds another hand pulling him up, and so he is saved. Two **opposing** forces and directions, with antagonistic intent come into play here, death and resurrection, upward and downward, water and air. As to who or what is pulling Severian down GW gives no account. We may imagine it to be the collective spirit of those interred underwater, or the lake itself personified, or something that lacks a name as it arises from a place where names no longer count. Later in the story a **mermaid** strongly attempts to take Severian into the aquatic world; the same force of water seems here to run in parallel.

#### **Contrast 9: Severian's sword**

The role of the sword, which can be seen here as a symbol of the Christian cross, is quite emphatic at this moment: the cross stands for both death and resurrection. Severian is saved at the moment he regains *Terminus Est*, at the very second death (or the Devil) tries to take him down. Of course, Severian is an executioner by profession at this time, so the fact that he often owes his life to his trusted sword which is also the instrument for beheading persons is one of the prominent **dialecticals** threading through the entire work.

### **Contrast 10: Dorcas returns to life**

Dorcas is the person who by grabbing his wrist saves Severian after he has surfaced from under the water but is once more sinking. No one has actually seen how this petite young woman, dazed and unable to tell who she is has suddenly appeared. Wolfe never reveals what has happened, but apparently she has emerged from the water, having been one of the bodies submerged there after her death. Another **contrast** then: death and resurrection, former life and present life. **Antipodes** can also be found in the fact that two persons have exchanged places for a short time in the water: Severian was about to drown at the moment Dorcas returned to life. Another **contrast** here is that Dorcas comes from among the dead enters as a saviour.

Consecutive causes appear here: Severian later on finds in his sabretache the Claw of the Conciliator, a gem with miraculous powers that Agia had secretly hidden there. This gem with miraculous powers, while submerged with Severian, may have been the force that resurrected Dorcas, who then saved him. Water and its connections to death and life often come up in GW's work. Water is the basis of earthly life—as well as death for terrestrial creatures—and is also the medium of Christian baptism, and of ideas and rituals in many other religions and philosophies. The arising of a young woman from the water is reminiscent of the myth of the birth of Aphrodite and of other divinities.

Clearly "Dorcas" may be abbreviated to "Cas", the name mentioned by the old man (see also section on *Names*). This puzzling parallel is somewhat ambiguously resolved in a scene near the end of TBONS, when Severian sees Dorcas again, but remains unnoticed by her. She, as the agent of the good hand is also initially unnamed, as if reflecting a relationship to the anonymity of the old man.

### **Contrast 11: the clothing on Dorcas and Agia**

Although the ethics of Dorcas and Agia and the garments worn by them are quite **antithetical**, the two women share the imperfection of their clothing: Agia's inexpensive, though dry dress is torn at the shoulders, exposing her breast. Dorcas is clad in a waterlogged fabric long ago decomposed by the acidic waters, but her body is, it seems, still decently covered.

### **Contrast 12: Hildegrin's opposing qualities**

Suddenly entering the scene, Hildegrin, the other man with a boat, finally pulls Severian on to the floating sedge. He is a large burly man, who introduces himself with an oversized business card as "Hildegrin the Badger", an earth excavator. This occupation suggests the subterranean, something unseen below the surface, as in the previous events connected with water, and it is another reminder in general of **dualities** in the apparent and the hidden. However, at this moment Hildegrin is on the side good as he hands a bottle of brandy to the shivering Dorcas, and as he also agrees to row them across the lake. Still, later in the chapter Hildegrin is recognized by Severian, after the former's utterance of a particular sentence as the grave robber he had early in the story collided with during the dark of night in the cemetery. These are two **contradictory** aspects of Hildegrin. The subterranean plays an important part in Wolfean worlds. Many important places, like the Autarch's palace lie underground. The *Book of the Long Sun* and his fascinating short story *Tracking Song*, feature extensive subterranean sceneries.

### **Contrast 13: Hildegrin's opposite roles**

Hildegrin's part in robbing a grave, involved in the hedonistic recreation of the memories of the dead, an event that becomes intimately linked to Severian's own life in which he shares Thecla's memories, is in a way a partial resurrection of a mind. For this reason his earlier behavior offers a **contrast** to his present one where he is transporting

Severian to the place to gather the weapon which would, it is presumed, lead to his death. That Severian eventually survives the combat is in itself a **contrary** point. Yet in its involvement with resurrecting memories Hildegrin's earlier action lies in **parallel** to the old man's desires to see again his wife's face, in an incomplete, only visual resurrection. Additionally, to Charon's trade Hildegrin's is **antithetical**: the mythical boatman took the person to Hades, whereas a grave robber transports it back.

**The element of contrasts so far:** the examples cited up to now might not be more than coincidences artificially brought together as if they were components of some system. However, considering the remarkable arrangement of the next set of contraries, where plot, art and philosophical content are almost mechanically interlaced, it seems certain that Wolfe, perhaps not entirely consciously, has produced an unusual piece of literary art in which two parallel channels carrying pairs of opposing counterpoints interact. At times these interactions form **parallels**, other times they stand in **contrast**. This process starts unobtrusively, but it continuously grows in speed and intensity until the contraries actually overlap in a climactic sequence. Such a mechanistic arrangement can be represented in geometrical diagrams of perfect symmetricalities. See Diagrams 000

### The Stretto

It is the nature of stories that an initially simple plot eventually "thickens" and connects earlier events in a sudden rise of surprising developments. On the other hand, Wolfe, in the episode discussed "thickens" not so much the plot, but the composition of elements which are within, yet outside of the plot, as he compresses into a brief interval an intricately interwoven collection of **antithetical** elements that are not mere rich allusions, but a statement of the essential ethical signature of TBONS: balance, justice, love and wisdom.

The term *stretto*, applicable to this remarkable section is borrowed from music and it refers to a climactic episode in a contrapuntal piece, the fugue, where melody lines heard separately up to that point all enter in quick succession one after the other and thus in tightly woven perfect harmonies lead to a powerful finale. It is as if three or four different songs were played simultaneously, and would still sound as one. In musical composition the successful incorporation of this device is invariably the sign of genius.

"Stretto" is the closest term we can find for describing what GW has achieved in writing the climax of the lake episode. I believe that in this interlocked structure of **contrasts**, probably never before found in literature, we see a sign of astonishing mastery. This short scene contains no less than **13** closely associated/overlapping elements of contrast. The accompanying charts allow graphic view of the process. In fact, the visual and narrative aspect of Wolfe's structure can be shown as a diagram so artfully organized that it could serve as the compositional frame of a painting. Please see file *Diagrams.pdf*.

### **Contrasts 14: balancing the boat**

Hildegrin tells his passengers that his boat loaded with four persons will float dangerously low in the water. If kept level the boat will be safe, but by **contrast**, if unbalanced it will be flooded, and so orders a seating arrangement where Agia alone occupies the seat in the bow, in the front, and Dorcas and Severian sit together at the stern while he himself rows positioned in the middle of the boat, to keep an eye on Dorcas who in her confused state may suddenly move and tilt the boat. The adjacent seating of Dorcas and Severian also provides the ground for the amazing conversation between them which forms the climax of this episode.



### **Contrast 15: contrary preferences**

This arrangement is **contrary** to Agia's plans; she wanted to sit with Severian and at the same time to keep Dorcas, whom she has several times wanted to leave behind, separated. However—in this devilishly logical construction by Wolfe—Hildegrin wants to have Dorcas in his sight, so he can to make adjustments in case the boat becomes unbalanced.

### **Contrast 16: The distribution of good and bad**

It may be pedantic to point out that the four persons here form a minor **contrast**: two men as against two women. This may be accidental, but still a balanced image is created. However, there is also a symmetry of the ethical nature of the characters. Dorcas and Agia are at **opposite** poles, one harmless, one of evil intentions. Hildegrin and Severian are both essentially benevolent but one is a grave robber, and the other is trained as a torturer and is an executioner by profession, and so they occupy the **midsection** of the ethical range. The bad is separated from the good due to logic that inescapably fits the physics of the situation. What reason would another author think of? Or not think of it at all? See *diagram 000*.

### **Contrast 17: social dialect**

Gene Wolfe's ability to handle any style is phenomenal. Throughout his fiction a great variety exists: dialects, personal or social, speech of people of various ages or genders appearing in various times in history. Whether it is the language of the Bible, of classics, science fiction, fantasy, popular press, mysteries, or of hippies, humorous, the stern, learned, unschooled, servant, master, priest, merchant, mechanical men or women, they are all expertly handled. This scene brings out Hildegrin's uneducated speech, rich in its particular expressiveness, such as: "That's because this whole peep show is meant to look like a dead volcaner", and "It may be somebody cracked her over the head, took her things, and threw her in here thinking she was gone. There's more ways in, Mistress Slop, than the curator knows it." To Hildegrin this biosphere is a "peep show" and he offers a simple explanation, connected with the criminal world, as to how and why Dorcas, wet and covered with dripping rags had suddenly risen from the water. As for the curator, according to Hildegrin, once more choosing an underworld perspective, a criminal has more ways to enter the Botanic Gardens than its curators are aware of. Calling Dorcas "Mistress Slop", speaking as if to a youngster, however, covers his sympathy, since he quickly offers her brandy to warm her shivering body. The brandy flask is shaped like a dog, writes GW, a great lover of dogs, with the bone in its mouth serving as the stopper. After Dorcas, Severian, equally wet, takes a drink, and he notes that "by the time I replaced the bone in the dog's mouth, his belly was, I think, better than half empty". This is one of the beautiful and unexpected little details that decorates Wolfean prose. Someone else would have written: "Hildegrin offered us some brandy and both Dorcas and I took a few gulps." This pretty gems, rich in its visual content also harbors the notion that dog is man's helper. In this scene the **contrasts** lie between Severian's refined and Hildegrin's uncultured elocution, as well as between Hildegrin's apparent coarseness and underlying benevolence.

### **Contrast 18: Dorcas finds a flower**

Severian notices that Dorcas has placed a water hyacinth in her hair, the very first flower he had seen in the garden and he wonders where she has picked it, since he sees no other flowers anywhere in the water. The **contrast** is clear. Dorcas has just come back to life in a dreary condition, but resurrected she to make herself and therefore the world (at least Severian's) prettier. This expresses the creative, decorative, nurturing nature of a good woman; with her arrival flowers bloom. The image of the Earth mother is

evoked here, and even of Eve. How she found the flower is not explained, and so the scene remains tinted with a sense of a miracle. That Severian makes nothing more of it is an element of seeming simplicity on his part, but the elegance of this small detail is another instance of GW's mastery.

### **Contrast 19: the two kinds of flowers**

Dorcas' putting a flower in her hair, symbolizing renewed life, stands in **contraposition** to the fact that the four persons are on the way to harvest the *avern*, a flower of death. It is not hard to recognize this juxtaposition, nor the fact that to begin the chapter entitled "The Flower of Dissolution" with the event celebrating a flower as the symbol of resurrection is an example of artful humor, here expressed as an idyllic counterpoint.

### **Contrast 20: the lake *versus* the mountain**

Hildegryn recounts how the lake had been artificially created imitating the crater of a dead volcano filled with water, and that a certain dark spot visible on the ascending rim of the crater wall is a cave. In it lives the Cumean, a woman who knows past and future. Here is a **contrast** between the real and the artificial, between the flat, cold and silent lake, and the steep sides of the mouth of a volcano. And a suitable **parallel**, too: the dead volcano is overlooking the Lake of Endless Sleep.

### **Contrast 21: the real and the copy**

The Garden of Endless Sleep, according to Hildegryn, is a replica of some other place. From various details we can tell that here is the duplicate of the extinct volcano in the Neapolitan region of Italy, the rim of which surrounds Lago Averno. The nearby ruins are of the town of Cumae which in Classical times was the abode of the Cumean sibyl, the woman who saw into the future. GW has here taken history and mythology to introduce into the plot **contrasts** between the real and the copy as well as the past and the present.

Lago Averno is thought to derive its name from the Greek, "a-ornos", or "no birds", and this is alluded to in Hildegryn's account. The elegant Wolfean twist at this point is that although he does bring in the idea of the absence, as well as the presence of birds, he does not connect the word "Averno" to birds, but instead applies it to the "*avern*", the poisonous plant which Severian is seeking for his weapon in combat. Thus he computes a formula whereby the etymology, history and legend of the lake is innocently hidden in the name of a plant essential to the story line and so he creates another minor **contrast** between the use of the same word in two different ways.

### **A parallel —Helliconia**

In his great epic trilogy, *Helliconia*, Brian Aldiss called the circumplanetary observation station *Avernus*, clearly connecting it with Lake Avernus, apparently because in that story the satellite is an intermediary, a stage between Earth and the planet Helliconia, and as the observers look down at Helliconia, as if that was hell. It is likely that Aldiss chose this appellation for that planet for both reasons. His skills with story and structure, as well with names is in a class with Gene Wolfe.

### **Contrasts 22: the manatee**

Earlier the old man spoke about manatees that had at one time abounded in the lake and created a disturbance when visitors expecting to see faces of dead relatives were startled by manatees looking up at them from beneath, and so the wizardly Father Inire ordered the planting of the deadly *averns* here to kill the manatees. Nevertheless, Severian happens to see a manatee's submerged face looking up at him just after they start crossing the lake. The presence of these tropical animals in this cold swampy climate,

despite the averns, is an additional **contradiction** and once more mirrors a counterposition of life and death. Manatees, considered a possible source of the myth of mermaids, is an element wonderfully employed here. GW shows the skill of an engineer, something he is in both of his vocations: the manatees symbolize life in a dead medium, the manatees account for the presence of the avern plants, the manatees presage Severian's later meetings with supernatural women of great size rising from the water.

### **Contrast 23: birds die—birds flourish:**

Hildegryn further explains that although this body of water is called "Lake of Birds" because many dead birds are found in the water, there are many living ones about but that this should not seem like a **contrast** of contradictions because birds are common where there are dead bodies. This is immediately followed with a **contrast** and a **parallel** in words of a gentler tone as Severian says "And recalling how the trushes sang in our necropolis, I nodded." Birds singing in the cemetery among the headstones: beauty and tragedy together in one place.

### **The climax of the episode**

### **Contrast 24: Severian's face—an overlapping of nine contrasts!**

The contents and art in the next brief interval contain nine **mirror contraries** so highly perfected that they can only be conveyed through GW's own words. Hildegryn claims he sees in Severian's face the fear of his impending death in combat. Severian denies this: "I wasn't thinking about monomachy—or dying either." Then he continues, "in my ear, too softly, I think, even for Hildegryn to hear, Dorcas said, 'Yes you were. Your face was full of beauty, of a kind of nobility. When the world is horrible, then thoughts are high, full of grace and greatness.' I looked at her thinking she was mocking me, but she was not." Dorcas continues: "The world is filled half with evil and half with good. We can tilt it forward so that more good runs into our minds, or back, so that more runs into this." A movement of her eyes took in all the lake. But the quantities are the same, we only change the proportions here and there."

'I would tilt it as far back as I can go, until the last evil runs out altogether, I said.

'It might be the good that would run out. But I am like you; I would bend time backward if I could.' (Why??)

'Nor do I believe that beautiful thoughts—or wise ones—are engendered by external troubles.'

'I did not say beautiful thoughts, but thoughts of grace and greatness, though I suppose that is a kind of beauty. Let me show you.' She lifted my hand and slipping it inside her rags pressed it to her right breast. I could feel the nipple, as firm as a cherry, and the warmth of the gentle mound beneath it, feather-soft and alive with racing blood. 'Now, she said, 'what are your thoughts? If I have made the external world sweet to you, aren't they less than they were?'

'Where did you learn all this?' I asked her. Her face was drained of its wisdom, which condensed in crystal drops at the corners of her eyes."

The **opposites** here: 1) Hildegryn's judgment of Severian's face is contradicted by Severian; 2) Severian thinks Dorcas is mocking him, but she is serious; 3) the world contains equal amounts of good and evil; 4) Severian's wish corrected by Dorcas; 5) a horrible world gives rise to noble thoughts; 6) Dorcas' natural innocence is negated when she places Severian's hand on her breast; 7) the unclean rags covering Dorcas covering the purity of her warm, life-giving breast; 8) the profound eloquence from the mouth of a simple young woman who just recently had been buried in watery depths ; 9) the sudden emergence of Dorcas wisdom and its immediate disappearance. These

**nine contrasting** opposites closely packed inside a brief dialogue form the absolute structural climax of the episode, the high point of the *stretto*. This composition is a literary marvel. The way in which Dorcas expresses herself is an incredibly beautiful way of alloying the sensual and the spiritual. Who can find a parallel to the exquisiteness of the last paragraph? The phrase about wisdom leaving Dorcas's face has a marked yet subdued taste of drama: it is like the curtains quietly coming down on the scene.

### **Contrast 25 (and 26, 27): the Cumean Sibyl**

Three opposites, one major and two minor antipodes can be found here. Is it Dorcas who is speaking here? She is a simple young woman, ignorant of who she is and where she came from, and yet she suddenly becomes a source of wisdom? It is no coincidence that Hildegren talks of the presence of the Cumean sibyl in a cave up on the cliff side. Clearly, it is the Cumean sibyl speaking through Dorcas, and one **contrast** is between her and Dorcas, who, as Severian describes, is talking through this exchange so quietly that only Severian hears her words. Another **contradistinction**: all this silent but serene wisdom uttered aboard a small boat moving across a cold and stagnant lake! A face, "draining of wisdom", in a place with so much water is one more instance of **opposites**. Tear drops, crystal, eyes, otherwise all commonplace poetic clichés, are worked here by Wolfe into a novel and muted yet strikingly vivid pictorial and emotional imagery!

Wolfe's superb skill is absolutely evident here. Why did he bring in the problem of boat overload and need for proper balance in the water: was it to have Severian and Dorcas sit together so that their dialogue can take place? Certainly by doing so he was able to convey the difference between Dorcas' and Agia's nature, the Cumean sibyl, who appears in the novel later on, a philosophical statement, and some beautiful prose! See *Diagrams* below for a geometrical rendition of the interlocking contraries of this scene.

### **Summary of contrasts in the ferrying episode**

In this single episode GW has woven together a wealth of elements: death and resurrection, time and space, happiness and misery, philosophy, geology, biology, history, mythology, and has succeeded in fashioning for us a fabulously original setting, and no less a narrative of astonishing prose and poetry. The way in which opposing **contrasts** are linked together so unobtrusively, never emphasizing the antitheses, and without the least trace of intellectual pretensions is the hallmark of a true master.

### **Mirrors and contrasts**

Mirrors are important elements in the motive structure of TBONS and they often come up in the narrative, especially those of Father Inire. They reflect aspects of time and space, and more deeply, the inherently ambiguous nature of the senses and of the mind: does the real world exist outside the mind? The surface of the water is a mirror as well, and GW likes to contrast things above and below the water. Mirrors involve projection, and so they relate to the fundamental philosophical problem of determining what is real and what is a projection, whether reality exists inside or outside the mind. Reminiscent of Melville's technique in *Moby Dick*, Wolfe here places a seemingly unrelated chapter into story, strongly **contrasting** with it, about Father Inire and his mirrors, inserted between the entry by Severian and Agia into the Jungle Garden, and the odd chronology of the scene with Robert, Marie and Isangoma. Perhaps this intermezzo touches on the idea of the odd translations in time experienced here by Severian.

### **Other points of contrasts in TBONS**

A whole web of oppositions and symmetrical reflections can be found throughout TBONS. Eighteen of the more easily recognized ones can be listed:

Agia (the scheming and malevolent woman) vs. Dorcas (the sincere and good woman); Severian (the professional executioner) vs. Severian (the merciful), Severian (a lowly orphan commoner) vs. the Autarch (the supreme ruler), the Autarch as the highest power vs. the Autarch as the sad androgyne running a brothel, Severian's two sets of memories, his own vs. that of Thecla, Severian (the poor orphan) vs. he who becomes the Autarch, Jonas (the kind, profound and independent mechanical space farer) vs. Hethor (the masochistic, sycophantic and malevolent human space farer), Nessus (the capital city) vs. Acis (the provincial town), Thecla (the high-class noble woman surrounded by luxury) vs. Thecla (imprisoned and tortured), the real Thecla vs. the kahibit (prostitute) impersonating her, Urth (in Severian's time) vs. Urth (of the past or future), The Claw of the Conciliator (not a claw but a gem), sometimes working a miracle, sometimes not, the Autarch (as the owner of the House Azure, a bordello) vs. the Autarch (the emperor in the House Absolute), the (big) Severian meets small Severian the boy, Jolenta (the voluptuous woman with a common mind) vs. Dorcas (the dainty but attractive intelligent woman), Jonas (the metallic mechanical man) loves Jolenta (the chemically altered human), Dr. Talos vs. the giant Baldander (who may be the father, rather than, as it first appears, the son of Dr. Talos), Morwenna (innocently executed) vs. Eusebia (the false accuser), Triskele (the three legged dog in Severian's boyhood) vs. Severian (who becomes eventually becomes lame). The important role of mirrors in TBONS, in representing the multiplicity of times and locations in Father Inire's mirrors seem to emphasize the significance of the surprising number of **contrasting** antithetical mirror images that have been discussed.

### **Gyoll and Acis—the dialectics of the two rivers**

I would like to append to the above examples of **antitheses** a set from *The Claw of the Conciliator*, the second volume of TBNS, Chapter 2? in Severian's description of the rivers **Gyoll** and **Acis**.

Before relating his first impressions of the Acies castle and Acis River in his new office as executioner in the town of Acies, Severian first recalls the day he left the Torturer's Citadel, ("the only place I had ever known"), and viewed the River Gyoll flowing through the great capital Nessus. "The city had spread before me to the limits of vision, with Gyoll traced across it like a green slime of a slug across a map; even the Wall had been visible on the horizon at some points, and nowhere was I beneath the shadow of a summit much superior to my own." The wall surrounding the city was like a veritable mountain chain that some writers would probably describe by giving its metrical dimensions. GW achieves far more with a marvelously restrained simile, as Severian says catching sight of the Wall: "...which now rose in the distance as the walls of a common fortress must rise before a mouse." And a little later, he once more portrays the Wall in a poetic circumlocution: "There are few sorts of birds, I think, that would fly over it."

#### **The Acis**

Severian gazes from the top of a high donjon in Acies Castle when he portrays the river Acis, flowing through Acies, the small provincial capital by the mountains, "Here the impression was very different. I bestrode the Acis, which leaped toward me down a succession of rocky steps each twice or three times the height of a tall tree. Beaten to a foaming whiteness that glittered in the sunlight, it disappeared beneath me and reap-

peared as a ribbon of silver racing through the city as neatly contained in its declivity as one of those toy villages in a box that I (but it was Thecla) recalled receiving on a birthday." Here we see, then, the absolute **opposite** of the Gyll quietly meandering in the lowlands. A second **contrast** follows: from the top of the tower the wild and foaming river is seen approaching one side of the castle, go under it, and then return to view on the other side, but now considerably tamed. And we find one more **counterpoise** in this paragraph. Severian's simile derived from Thecla's memory is at once tragic, as it recalls her sad death, and charming as it connects with a child's memory.

Leaving the castle, Severian observes the river from a different perspective: "my gaze came at last to the margins of the river again, and I began to study the landings there, and the storehouses, and even the pyramids of barrels and boxes and bales that waited there to be carried to aboard some vessel. Now the water no longer foamed, save when it was obstructed by the piers. Its color was nearly indigo, and like the indigo shadows seen at evening on a snowy day, it seemed to slip silently along, sinuous and freezing; but the motion of the hurrying caiques and laden feluccas showed how much turbulence lay concealed beneath that smooth surface, for the larger craft swung their long bowsprits like fencers, and both yawed crabwise at times while their oars trashed the racing eddies."

**Three opposites** comprise the content of this paragraph. In this view the river, passing through the city, is a) now indigo colored, not white as before, of a chroma comparable to the color of winter shadows, and b) now sinuous and quiet, but c) with a surreptitious reminder of its recent past: foam still produced where the water strikes the piers, and now when the river allows transport by ships it still makes it difficult with its turbulent undercurrents.

Aside from the structural artistry in these contrastive **opposites**, the quality of prose in these scenes is of a level that needs no further description. It is only the highest literary gift that can paint with such color a variety of things and thoughts, so perfectly and effortlessly compressed into two medium length paragraphs, where they are all connected, where all are unexpected, novel and thought provoking, without a taint of triteness, and where they are quietly beautiful without trying to be so.