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The Divine Irruption in Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the Long Sun*

> Francis, go and rebuild My house which, as you see, is all being destroyed.
>
> *Legenda maior* of Saint Francis of Assisi, II. 1

When humans encounter the divine—when the divine reveals itself directly to humanity—we often make mistakes in how we understand the experience. We can take God on our terms rather than his, and bury him behind a morass of myths and legends, as pagans did. And even understanding who he is correctly will not guarantee that we will understand his message, any more than Francis of Assisi did after the vision of the San Damiano crucifix. This theme of divine self-revelation is masterfully explored in the most unlikely of places: a science fiction tetralogy known as *The Book of the Long Sun* by noted author Gene Wolfe.[1] One does not usually associate the genre of science fiction with Catholic culture—usually it is in opposition to it—but there are the occasional extraordinary works such as Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and C.S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy* in which explicitly Catholic themes are explored, and Wolfe's *The Book of the Long Sun* is one such. Wolfe himself is a

convert to Catholicism, who began to study the Catholic faith in order to get married but then became deeply interested in it for his own sake, citing as his main influences Thomistic theology and the writings of G. K. Chesterton in particular, and the Inklings in general.[2] Wolfe also composes complex, multilayered prose, often with an extraordinarily rich vocabulary that is influenced by his love of onomastics and interest in Greco-Roman culture.[3] His narratives are also often complex, expansive works, full of sharply defined and unusually deep characters, though readers should beware that he is a master of the "unreliable narrator" technique, making his characters not always what they seem at first reading. As such, the work of Gene Wolfe in general—and *The Book of the Long Sun* in particular—rewards the careful reader and is a fine addition to the corpus of mythopoetic fiction established by the likes of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.[4]

On one level, *The Book of the Long Sun* is a sly inversion of a by-now hackneyed trope of science fiction: the generation-ship tale. Absent the miraculous "faster than light" engines so beloved of science fiction, a realistic trip to the stars will be a long and slow process taking years, if not centuries. One method of managing such a trip is to build a vessel large enough to hold an entire population with the expectation that after decades or centuries in flight only the descendants of the original crew will arrive at their destination, a new colony planet. Many stories have been written using the theme of some technological or social catastrophe striking the crew, such that they relapse into techno-barbarism, forgetting they are on a ship at all and mythologizing the original crew or builders of the ship into deities. In such tales, the ship is usually either failing or the long-forgotten colony world is fast approaching, and it is up to the protagonists to undergo some epiphany that causes them to realize the truth: their "world" is nothing more than a vehicle, their gods are nothing more than myths or mere men, and their task is either to force their fellows to realize the truth and save the ship or else to depart for the colony world with those few who believe them.[5]

As it stands, the trope is a materialist allegory: the scales fall from the eyes of ignorant, benighted protagonists, who abandon their primitive beliefs for the truth of a glorified Science and a bright, technological future.

Give Gene Wolfe credit, in *The Book of the Long Sun,* for demolishing this trope utterly. In the first place, unlike most science fiction writers, Wolfe is acutely sensitive to the importance and centrality of religion—even a religion based on myths—to human life and the human order. *The Book of the Long Sun* provides a serious look at the spiritual development of a character who has his religious views shaken to the core, and Wolfe is mature enough to realize that inherited beliefs are not easily changed, nor should they be, even when they are wrong. In the second place, Wolfe uses this tetralogy to explore in allegorical form one of his favorite themes: the coming of Christianity to the pagan, Greco-Roman world; the uneasy coexistence of both faiths in the same world; and the occasional conflict of those faiths in the mind and heart of a single individual.[6] Furthermore, it is to Wolfe's credit that he eschews triumphalism and superficiality in his examination of these themes: his tale is complex, and all the more rewarding for being so.

Our stage, then, is the Whorl, a cylindrical asteroid that has been fitted with engines and hollowed out to provide a colony for humans to live in while they journey to the stars. The Whorl spins to provide gravity, and humans live within its terraformed interior like ants crawling around inside a soda bottle. There are no windows, so the crew never sees the stars that slowly revolve outside the Whorl: instead, the ship it is lit by a long artificial light that runs the length of the cylinder (the eponymous "Long Sun" of the series' title). As the story progresses, we gradually discover that the Whorl was constructed countless millennia in our future by a tyrant named Typhon, who clawed his way to a position of dictatorship over the earth.[7] As a monument to his vanity and to spread his empire, Typhon ordered the construction of the Whorl and sent it off into space to colonize a distant star system with two habitable planets,

simply named "Green" and "Blue." Because of his lust for domination Typhon sought to retain control over the inhabitants of the Whorl, even though they would be out of his reach, by two immoral acts. First, he altered the memories of anyone entering the Whorl so that they would forget the earth and remember his version of the world order alone. Unfortunately for Typhon, this process was not an exact one, and people who received it sometimes retained large segments of their old memories. To deal with this problem, Typhon engaged in another immoral act: he had the memories and personalities of himself, his family, and his courtiers duplicated and placed within the computer systems of the Whorl, making them into gods and creating a religion around themselves. As "the great god Pas," Typhon presided over an Olympian-style pantheon of deities, the Nine, comprising himself (the god of the sun), his wife Echidna (the mother/fertility goddess), and their seven children: Scylla (goddess of lakes and rivers), Molpe (goddess of wind), Thelxiepeia (goddess of music), Phaea (goddess of food and healing), Sphigx (goddess of war), Tartaros (god of the night), and Hierax (god of death). The rest of his court formed the personalities for some fifty-three-odd lesser gods—such as Typhon's former concubine, who became Kypris, the goddess of love and beauty—all of them ruling from "Mainframe," their Olympus. Typhon's manufactured religion was planned to appear Greco-Roman in practice, with priests and priestesses sacrificing animals before Sacred Windows (giant computer terminals/viewing screens), all the while hoping for the manifestation of their favored divinity in that Sacred Window.

All is not well in the Whorl, however, by the time the story opens. The vessel has been in flight for three centuries and has reached its destination with its inhabitants unaware of the fact. Nor do they know that shortly after the Whorl left Earth the rest of the gods of Mainframe revolted against Pas and his cruelty and deleted him. With no strong personality like his in Mainframe, the systems of the ship were improperly maintained, and after three centuries are starting to fail. The same is true of the lifestyle of the inhabitants

of the Whorl: while there are holdovers of higher technology in the hands of the wealthy, the style of life for many has regressed to be like that of a city-state of Renaissance-era Italy. In the absence of Pas, the gods squabble privately amongst themselves and have not manifested themselves to their worshippers in a generation.

Our protagonist in this tale is a young cleric named Silk, one of the most virtuous and appealing characters in Wolfe's fiction, a "good man in a bad religion."[8] Silk is an augur in the city-state of Viron and is a very low-level priest of the gods of Mainframe whose chief religious duties consist of sacrificing animals before his local Sacred Window and reading their entrails for prophecies and discernments of the will of the gods. Silk is thus a pagan with a style of worship that would be familiar to any priest of the Greco-Roman world. But there are important differences, and the organization and practices of the religion of Mainframe in many ways resemble a distortion or even a mockery of Catholicism. There are ecclesiastical offices ranging from the archbishop-like Prolocutor at the top to the nun-like sibyls at the bottom, as well as supposedly celibate clergy wearing black religious habits. Furthermore, the religion also has a number of other minor Catholic-style elements present as well (a sacred book called the *Chrasmological Writings,* prayer beads like nine-decade rosaries with a swastika-like cross at the end, sacraments and sacramentals like shriving sinners and blessing "with the sign of addition," etc.). But in addition to Catholic elements, there are also elements of technological fetishism present in the Mainframe religion as well: augurs like Silk are not just butchers of animals but also skilled technicians who are expected to splice wires and keep the Sacred Windows in good working order (amusingly, the swastika-like "voided crosses" on the augurs' rosary-analogues can be used as little screwdrivers). The sum total of all of these elements combine to induce in the modern reader—particularly the modern Catholic reader—a cumulative sense of unease and wrongness in Silk's religion. Despite this, Silk himself is not a bad man—quite the opposite. He willingly serves as the priest of a run-down

"manteion," or parish, in one of the worst neighborhoods in the city-state of Viron. He genuinely loves his parishioners despite the fact that many of them are thieves and criminals, and he ministers to their social and spiritual needs to the best of his abilities. In particular, he runs a school or "palaestra" for the children of the members of his parish, giving them the only chance at education, betterment, or even moral improvement that they will ever receive. In short, he has nearly everything a man can desire: youth, health, intelligence, good looks, charisma, learning, and holiness, and he is very, very happy.

Until one day, when the bottom falls out of his world.

The Book of the Long Sun opens with the words, "Enlightenment came to Patera Silk on the ball court; nothing could ever be the same after that."[9] In the middle of playing a ball game with some of the students of his palaestra, Silk receives a divine revelation. In an instant, Silk's perceptions are taken outside of time and space entirely, and he receives a divine enlightenment at the behest of one of the gods. For a timeless moment, Silk perceives eternity, and a series of visions and revelations pour into his consciousness. He sees visions of himself and other people and even his world, all looking like absurd little clockwork figures, and all "shown to him that he might know it for what it was, spread for him so that he might know how precious it was, though its shining clockwork had gone some trifle awry and must be set right by him; for this he had been born."[10] Silk's world changes utterly: he sees the world and its people as they truly are—something small and foolish, but infinitely precious to a particular god.

With this knowledge comes a realization that he has been given a task to accomplish by this god—indeed, it was to complete this task that he was born. But what god is this who has so enlightened him? Silk recognizes him as the Outsider, the most obscure and least worshipped of the sixty-three gods of the *Chrasmological Writings,* but one whom Silk comes to understand is extremely different from that of the other divinities of the Mainframe religion. They are

all *inside* the Whorl and appear to their worshippers in the Sacred Windows occasionally, but the Outsider is *outside* the Whorl, never appears in the Sacred Windows, and only very occasionally provides an enlightenment to a person. For what task does the Outsider commission poor Patera Silk? To save his manteion and palaestra, which Silk understands are precious to the Outsider for some reason and are in danger of being lost. As part of his epiphany, Silk is made to understand that his predecessor at his mateion, the humble and holy Patera Pike, had once prayed for the survival of his troubled manteion and had been enlightened by the Outsider with the promise that a savior would come—Silk himself. He realizes, "I'm the help . . . the Outsider sent to him, to save the manteion and its palaestra . . . I am to expect no help from him. I *am* help."[11]

And, unfortunately, like so many humble and holy people throughout human history, Silk fails to understand the divine command completely, setting in motion a chain of events that tear apart his city, his religion, and his world.

The Book of the Long Sun is a chronicle of Silk's growth, both intellectual and spiritual. A humble and holy man, he is nevertheless innocent to the point of naivete, and has to learn some very hard truths before his understanding catches up with his intellect and holiness. For example, when, shortly after his epiphany his perpetually in-debt manteion is foreclosed upon by a gangster named Blood, Silk takes the event as a sign of the truth of the Outsider's revelation and presumes that since he has been enlightened by a god, he may use any means to carry out the god's will. Like Francis of Assisi, Silk interprets the Outsider's command in the most literal—and wrong—way possible. Under the advice of some of the criminal elements of his parish, Silk decides to break into the mansion of the crime lord Blood and steal back the deed to his manteion, a scheme that fails catastrophically, first sucking Silk into the seamy underworld of Vironese society and then propelling him further and further into prominence. Each novel of *The Book of the Long Sun* depicts Silk's rise higher and higher in Vironese society, with his thinking at

each step that he has come to the truth but realizing each time that the truth is a great deal more complicated than he thought. Much of this complication is due to the fact that Silk becomes a desirable cat's-paw for a number of factions seeking to dominate Viron, who collectively place him in the center of a truly Byzantine web of schemes, plots, and counterplots.[12]

The chaos and scheming of the digital divinities in Mainframe in the absence of the god Pas is echoed in the real world by the factions and scheming of the various cabals in Vironese society in the absence of legitimate authority. We learn that the central problem in Viron is that from its founding and in its charter, it was supposed to be governed by one man, the Caldé; but by Silk's time, the last Caldé had been overthrown and assassinated by a corrupt junta known as the Ayuntamiento, who have been ruling Viron illegitimately (and badly) ever since. To the people of Viron, Silk, with his natural abilities and his favor from the gods, is the natural candidate to restore the office of Caldé.[13] To the Ayuntamiento, Silk is a rival to be crushed. To his clerical superiors, Silk is a prophet to be manipulated. As matters begin to come to a head in Viron, the gods reappear in the Sacred Windows, and to them, Silk is another figure to manipulate, co-opt, or destroy; various gods try to do all three. To the denizens of the city-state of Trivigaunte, neighbor and rival of Viron, Silk is a useful ally, whose "rescue" during civil strife provides a convenient cover for plans to seize the city of Viron. Matters explode into full-fledged conflict, and Wolfe does an excellent job of depicting the social chaos, furious passions, blinding confusion, and utter futility of civil war. The more power Silk winds up with, the less he finds himself able to do: by the time Silk theoretically attains supreme power as Caldé, practically he finds himself powerless.[14]

The crisis of legitimate authority and the futility of a social order based on violence and error are major themes in *The Book of the Long Sun*. The members of the Ayuntamiento are bad not just because they are bad governors or illegitimate usurpers, but also because in a quest for power and immortality they have transferred their

consciousnesses to cybernetic bodies. When Silk meets one of their number, Chancellor Lemur, it is Lemur who most openly tells Silk about the true nature of the false gods of Mainframe, a truth that Silk already realizes, but does not want to believe.[15] Lemur's evil is compounded by the fact that he provides Silk with this false epiphany not to ennoble him but to destroy his old faith and replace it with a new one—the worship of Lemur himself, who, with political power and a robot body believes himself to be "a greater god than Pas."[16]

Similarly, Silk's Trivigaunte "allies" are bad not just because they are treacherous and duplicitous but also because they are a matriarchy and have rejected the worship of the gods of Mainframe to worship only goddess: Sphigx. To Wolfe, this doubtless represents a double apostasy of the natural order of life—however badly lived, and of the established religious order of the Whorl, however mistaken.

Finally, Silk's clerical leaders are bad because their leadership is illegitimate as well. Patera Quetzal, the Prolocutor of Viron is superficially a good man, who has managed religion in Viron well for a long time. He has forbidden human sacrifices and has long since realized the true nature of the false gods of Mainframe—he fears and knows their power but has refused to worship them. As a result, he has been working for a long time to *prevent* the visitation of the gods in the Sacred Windows, rather than encourage them. In the end, Quetzal becomes one of the strong players in carrying out the Plan of Pas, the human exodus from the doomed Whorl. Unlike Silk, however, Quetzal is a false messiah: readers gradually discover that he is not a human being at all but an *inhumu,* a vampiric shape-shifting alien from the colony world of Green who has snuck aboard the Whorl and seized control of the religion in Viron not to help people or to lead them to freedom and truth but to ensure that they will breed well and provide a plentiful food supply for his people.

When they manifest directly in the novel, the gods of Mainframe prove to be almost completely a thoroughly unlikable bunch. After all, for all his holiness, Silk in his office is little more than a glori-

fied butcher, sending animals to their deaths in large numbers to appease gods who cannot truly appreciate them.[17] Furthermore, almost all religions that depend on animal sacrifices sooner or later come to demand human sacrifices in time, as the gods of Mainframe do: when the goddess Scylla eventually manifests herself, she instructs her followers to contact her again with the directive, "Do something to get my attention. Fifty or a hundred children should catch my eye, and Viron's got plenty to spare."[18]

By contrast, the Outsider is not like the gods of Mainframe and does not delight in blood sacrifices. One of Silk's first attempts to please the Outsider is the sacrifice of the best victim he could find: a talking and semi-intelligent ravenlike bird known as a night chough. Various events conspire to prevent Silk from sacrificing the bird, and over time he comes to realize that the Outsider not only disapproved of the sacrifice but was actively punishing him with misfortunes for attempting it.[19] Furthermore, the gods of Mainframe are incredibly manipulative. Not only do they compete and bicker with each other, they are able to take over and control the minds of their worshippers. To the people of the Whorl, this is a form of supernatural possession, but it is actually very advanced neuroscience, another leftover from the tyrant Typhon's mind-control experiments on earth.[20]

The gods of Mainframe do not allow their worshippers true freedom. As Patera Quetzal explains, "There are people who love birds so much they free them. There are others who love them so much they cage them. Pas's love for us was of the first kind. Echidna's and the Seven's is the other."[21] The entire Whorl is a prison, literal and metaphorical, caging up humans and preventing them from realizing their true destiny, both social and spiritual. As the novels develop, it becomes clear to the reader if not the characters that not only is the Whorl a cage, it is a cage that is falling apart and threatening to destroy its captives in the process.

By contrast, over the course of the novels, Silk discovers, very slowly and painfully, that the only god who truly cares for humans,

and who is truly worthy of worship, is the Outsider. The Outsider's position in the pantheon of Mainframe is an odd one. As has been noted above, the Mainframe religion was created as an instrument of self-aggrandizement and domination by the Terran tyrant Typhon, who sought to cloak people's lingering memories of his court on Earth with the pantheon of Pas instead. It can be argued that Typhon did something similar with God—unable to eliminate him totally, Typhon tried to domesticate him as an "unknown god" in his invented religion. However, while it is possible to obscure God, it is never possible to push him away entirely; indeed, *The Book of the Long Sun* can be seen as a divine irruption: as Silk breaks into the mansion of the gangster Blood to try and save his manteion, so God has broken into the sealed, pagan, pointless world of the Whorl to try to save it. It takes four novels, but Silk eventually manages to come to some understanding of the true nature of divinity, as he explains to his former student Horn, the narrator of the books:

> "His Cognizance reminded me once that there are people who love birds so much they cage them, and others who love them so much they free them. Then he said that Echidna and the Seven were people of the first kind, and Pas a person of the second kind. When I bought Oreb, he was in a cage; and when I freed him I smashed that cage—never thinking that it might have seemed a place of refuge for him."
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> Horn said, "I never thought of the Whorl being a cage."
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> "I never had either, until the Outsider showed me what lies outside it."[22]

Very few authors have the skill and audacity to pull off a deus ex machina in fiction these days, but Wolfe does so, and manages it with considerable virtuosity. Perhaps it is due to the fact that his narrators are unreliable and do not always realize the truth when it is before them. Tantalizing hints are dropped throughout the novels as to the identity of the Outsider. Typhon/Pas's sacred writings, for

example, make interesting asides: to the fact that men and women were "made of mud (originally by the Outsider, according to one somewhat doubtful passage in the Writings)";[23] to the tale of A-man and Wo-man, the first humans, who were banished from a garden by the obscure god Ah Lah after listening to a cobra";[24] and to a story about how the Outsider himself considered the sellers of animal sacrifices as "last among men" and had once "beaten them severely in person."[25] Furthermore, Silk receives occasional chances to perceive the Outsider directly, though he never truly understands him, and when he does so, he finds that the Outsider has human attributes. For example, near death after an injury and in a delirium, Silk reaches out his hand for comfort; expecting none, he is surprised to find it gripped in hands that were "large and hard and warm . . . clean and gentle and full of healing."[26] At another point, when trying to discuss his enlightenment with an unbelieving fellow character, Silk describes witnessing a long play of images of "innumerable things he had done and made . . . things that [the Outsider] cares very much about, not all of them beautiful or lovable things to you . . . or to me."[27] One mentioned in passing is particularly telling: "There was a naked criminal on a scaffold, and we came back to that when he died, and again when his body was taken down. His mother was watching with a group of his friends, and when someone said he had incited sedition, she said that she didn't think he had ever really been bad, and that she would always love him."[28] Silk's world is so far in the future and so different from ours that the term "post-Christian" has no real meaning in its context. But at the same time, *all* ages after the Incarnation are post-Christian, and Christ does not forget us even when we forget him.

To look upon *The Book of the Long Sun* as merely a religious inversion of the usually secular generation-ship tale is to misunderstand it, I believe. Were that to be the case, Silk would simply understand the reality of the Outsider, proclaim a new faith, and end the tale, but Wolfe is far too careful an author to have that happen. In the first place, as we have seen, despite his goodness and enlightenment, Silk

never *quite* understands the Outsider, though he comes closer than anyone else does. In the second place, remember Wolfe's words (as quoted in note 6), as well as his personal background. One important theme in *The Book of the Long Sun* is legitimacy. True, the Whorl is a doomed prison, presided over by false gods. But it is also a home for its inhabitants, and its false gods are loved by a people who do not know they are false. However wicked they are, the gods of Mainframe have some legitimacy, and as a Catholic, Wolfe reminds the reader of the traditional—though unpopular—Catholic teachings that a bad social order is preferable to no social order and armed insurrection is not a path to meaningful social change. For all its justification, the civil war into which Viron descends in the novels is ultimately a confusing, senseless waste, bereft of any clear or moral winners, and the only sensible response of the innocent is flight. Furthermore, while Typhon may have been domineering, blasphemous, and wrong to have re-created himself as the digital god Pas, his unwitting worshippers cannot be held guilty for his sin or their own ignorance. The Outsider still loves them and hears their prayers, however wrongly directed; when Silk is first enlightened, he comments that one of the things that happened is that "[the Outsider] showed me all the prayers that have ever been said to any god for this manteion . . . thousands and thousands of prayers."[29] Perhaps as a result of having suffered insurrection and deletion at the hands of this family, the god Pas winds up being more than merely the copy of the tyrant who created him. His Plan, the exodus of people from the Whorl to the colony worlds, is the driving force behind the novels and is presented as something good, so much so that Pas is able to effect it in the end, at least in part, by revealing that he has not been truly deleted by his peers at all but has kept a backup copy of himself in hiding until the time was right to reappear.

Furthermore, the only two Mainframe gods in the stories who are even remotely sympathetic are also the only two gods who are struggling to carry out the Plan of Pas. One is his son Tartaros, the

only member of Typhon's familiars who refused digital apotheosis and who was duplicated against his will—as such, he is wiser and nobler than the other gods, despite his congenital blindness. The other is the goddess Kypris, Typhon's former courtesan and the only one of the deities who truly loved him. Both Tartaros and Kypris are instrumental in carrying out events that bring the Plan of Pas to fruition. But Pas's plan is good not as such but because it is a reflection of what the real God wants as well: in the end Silk admits, "Auk wants to carry out the Plan of Pas, and the Outsider wants it, too."[30] Interestingly, Kypris, who is the first deity to manifest in the novels, occupies a special position in the tale, given that one of the story threads is Silk's developing love for Blood's beautiful captive prostitute Hyacinth, who is cured of an addiction and rendered more intelligent and charming after having been "possessed" by the goddess Kypris.

Kypris represents love, which in turn is an aspect of real Love. When Chancellor Lemur demands that Silk worship him as a god, he is right to note that he is not so very different from the other gods of Mainframe. But Silk is able to resist his demands because he has known *real* gods—the Outsider and Kypris—and he says so.[31] Furthermore, when Silk is able first to realize and then to consummate his love for Hyacinth, he finds that the experience is very much like his enlightenment by the Outsider.[32] And in one of the most poignant and revealing passages in the novels, Silk receives a special enlightenment while worrying about the possible fate of Kypris at the hands of her digital siblings, the details of which are worth quoting in full:

> Love was the greatest of enchantments; if Echidna and her children succeeded in killing Kypris, Thelxiepeia would no doubt, would doubtless. . . .
>
> *Become the goddess of love in a century or less,* said the Outsider, standing not behind Silk as he had in the ball court, but before him—standing on the still water of the pool, tall and

> wise and kind, with a face that nearly came into focus, *I would claim her in that case, long before the end. As I have so many others. As I am claiming Kypris even now, because love always proceeds from me, real love, true love.*[33]

This passage is one of the few times in the novel where the reader shares in Silk's visions and the first and only time where we hear the words of the Outsider directly, rather than through Silk's narration of them. Here the Outsider reveals the simplest and profoundest truth about himself, *Deus caritas est*. He absorbs all that is best in the false gods of mankind, and always has.

At tale's end, Silk has changed utterly from the innocent cleric he was at the beginning. He leaves behind his clerical office (having resigned as an augur to marry Hyacinth), his parish, his city, his office as Caldé, and his faith in the gods of Mainframe. But he has gained much as well: faith in the Outsider, and a deep and transforming love for his new wife Hyacinth. It is in his love for Hyacinth that Silk finally stumbles, for he is a far better person than she, and his love is far deeper than hers. Moreover, his goodness and his love cause him to overlook a number of significant character flaws, in particular an incident of flagrant and perverse marital infidelity to him that wounds him grievously when he discovers it. By the end of the novels, after having lost nearly everything in his world, he comes to two realizations, each connected to one of his favorite deities. After suffering through numerous machinations, betrayals, and reversals of fortune, Silk decides to throw in his lot with the tide of refugees who are fleeing the pointless civil war in Viron and the malfunctioning Whorl, and who have discovered functioning shuttles that can take them away from the Whorl to the colony worlds. Looking down at one shuttle full of refugees, he realizes that they are members of his old parish and that he has fulfilled the mandate the Outsider gave him during his first enlightenment, telling his friends: "I've done it—saved it from the dissolution of the Whorl. Or at least I will have when we reach the new one. I was to save

our manteion, and that is the manteion, all of those people coming together to worship. The rest was trimming, very much including me."[34] In the end, Silk has finally understood what the Outsider *truly* meant and, like Francis of Assisi, has finally understood and fulfilled the divine mandate to "save my church."

Sadly, he is less successful with the things that pertain to his other favored divinity, the goddess Kypris, perhaps because no matter how much of a reflection of the true God she may be, she is still just a reflection and not to be regarded in the same way that the Outsider is. Just before boarding the departing shuttle, Silk preaches a last sermon to his friends, and in the process of doing so admits to his wife that he knows she has been unfaithful to him: "In the end, it is only love that matters. The Outsider once told me that though he's not Kypris, she cannot help becoming him. The more she becomes a goddess of love in truth, the more they will unite. . . . I have only this left to say . . . it is that love forgets injuries. I know that Hyacinth would never betray me . . . but if she did,—if she did a thousand times—I would still love her."[35] At these words, Hyacinth explodes in a fury of guilt and rage, refusing to leave the Whorl, excoriating Silk for abandoning the grandeur of being Caldé, and fleeing from him back into the chaos of Viron. Stung by the sudden choice of going to a new world with his people or returning to his wife and his old world, Silk chooses the latter. Like the prophet Hosea, he loves a faithless woman he hopes to redeem. And like Moses, he can lead his people to a new promised land, but he cannot enter it himself.

In summation, *The Book of the Long Sun* is an extraordinary work, from any number of perspectives. It can be enjoyed as a huge character study, and Wolfe manages the difficult task of supplying a huge cast of characters, and creating a unique form of diction for each—no mean feat. It is also a complicated political and adventure tale, involving a truly Byzantine collection of plots, conflicts, betrayals, captures, and escapes. It is further a very accomplished science fiction tale, in the best generation-ship tradition. But where it truly

succeeds, I think, is as a mythopoetic work, worthy of the Inklings Wolfe admired so much at their best. Seldom has the science fiction genre produced such a rich, and richly rewarding, Christian allegory.

Notes

1. The editions of these works cited in this article are the Tom Doherty Associates compiled omnibus volumes, being *Litany of the Long Sun* (comprising *Nightside the Long Sun* and *Lake of the Long Sun* [New York, 1994]), hereafter *Litany;* and *Epiphany of the Long Sun* (comprising *Caldé of the Long Sun* and *Exodus from the Long Sun* [New York, 1996]), hereafter *Epiphany.* Two articles by Nick Gevers, "Five Steps Toward Briah: Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the Long Sun*" and "The Reader as Augur: Beginnings and endings in Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the Long Sun,*" both written Summer 2000 and available online at http://www.ultan.org.uk/index.html, were particularly helpful in the preparation of this article and are highly recommended.
2. In his own words, "I discovered Chesterton and ended up reading everything of Chesterton's I could find. I had gone through very much the same thing earlier with C.S. Lewis." From a 1992 interview with James B. Jordan, available online at http://members.bellatlantic.net/~vze2tmhh/wolfejbj.html (accessed May 19, 2008).
3. Unusual features for a man who is also a Korean War veteran, career engineer (who helped invent Pringles potato chips), and former editor of *Plant Engineering,* who did not turn to full-time writing until 1983.
4. My favorite description is the breathless—but accurate—one given by critic Thomas Disch, who called *The Book of the Long Sun* "a tetralogy of couth, intelligence, and suavity that is also written in VistaVision with Dolby Sound. Imagine a Star Wars-style space opera penned by G.K. Chesterton in the throes of a religious conversion." In: *Overrated/Underrated: 100 experts topple the icons and champion the slighted,* ed. *American Heritage Magazine* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, Inc., 2001), 211.
5. The first major use of this trope was Robert Heinlein's 1941 tale "Universe"; it has been successively recycled in Brian Aldriss, *Starship,* 1958; Harry Harrison, *Captive Universe,* 1969; "The Starlost" TV series, 1973, and so on.
6. Wolfe has some idiosyncratic ideas about paganism that cause him to treat it with more respect than many individuals, either unbelievers or Christians, do. By his own admission,

   > One of the places where I probably split off from conventional Catholic thinking is that I believe that the gods of paganism were real. I don't think that they are entitled to the worship that they received from the pagans. I think what many of

> the biblical writers are saying is, "Yes, these are real powers, but it is wrong for you to give to them the honors that are due to God alone." And I think that that is exactly correct. (1992 interview with James B. Jordan)

Wolfe has explored this theme literally in the fantasy novel *There Are Doors,* in which characters interact with an entity who is a pagan goddess surviving in the modern world. *The Book of the Long Sun* represents a more allegorical treatment of this theme in the genre of science fiction, which also features "gods" who are not worthy of worship but who nevertheless are very real and powerful.

7. The character appears in another one of Wolfe's series—*The Book of the New Sun*—which is perhaps Wolfe's most brilliant work and is tangentially connected to this series. Typhon's essential wickedness is obvious in *The Book of the New Sun* by his mere appearance: he has chosen to pursue a perverse form of immortality by having his head transplanted onto a succession of unwilling victims.
8. See the text of a 2003 interview with Wolfe at http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intgw.htm.
9. Wolfe, *Litany,* 7.
10. Ibid., 8.
11. Ibid., 20.
12. Readers who enjoy elaborate tales of conspiracy and political intrigue can appreciate *The Book of the Long Sun* on this level alone.
13. Fittingly, as unbeknownst to everyone, himself included, Silk is actually the illegitimate son, after a fashion, of the previous Caldé.
14. In one very poignant passage, after becoming Caldé, Silk looks for his "rosary" to pray, but cannot find one and laments, "When I was a poor augur I had beads in my pocket but no money. Now I have money, but no beads" (Wolfe, *Epiphany,* 364).
15. Wolfe, *Litany,* 501 ff.
16. Ibid., 503.
17. When a soldier asks Silk how noncorporeal gods can benefit from bloody animal sacrifices, Silk fails to understand the depth of his question (ibid., 440).
18. Wolfe, *Epiphany,* 28.
19. Wolfe, *Litany,* 167. Later Silk names the bird Oreb and makes it his companion. Oreb is one of the most interesting characters in the novels: although a mere animal, he is nevertheless able to perceive matters more clearly than the human characters do, summing up his insights in succinct two-word sentences.
20. Ibid., 355.
21. Wolfe, *Epiphany,* 133.
22. Ibid., 618.
23. Wolfe, *Litany,* 351.
24. Wolfe, *Epiphany,* 19.
25. Wolfe, *Litany,* 12.
26. Wolfe, *Epiphany,* 139.
27. Wolfe, *Litany,* 490.

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 49.
30. Wolfe, *Epiphany,* 649.
31. Wolfe, *Litany,* 504.
32. Wolfe, *Epiphany,* 230, 668.
33. Ibid , 220.
34. Ibid., 702.
35. Ibid.