

THE SHADOW SINGER

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Even the Great Howard Sometimes Nods

Part One—Naming:

OR—That Which We Call #%\$& by Some Other Names Might Smell Better

"... et idem indignor quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus."

("... and yet I also become annoyed whenever the great Homer nods off.")

—Horace, *Ars Poetica*, ll. 358-359.

often translated as:

"Even great Homer sometimes nods." (ll. 359)

"Those oft are Stratagems which Errors seem,
Nor is it Homer Nods, but We that Dream."

—Alexander Pope, "Essay on Criticism"

It is likely that some to many of my fellow REHupans will rankle a bit at what this and following essays will be presenting. A few to some may count it as blasphemy of the first order. But I intend to discuss some of Robert E. Howard's flaws and fumbles as a writer (of course as I perceive them). As Horace noted in his *Ars Poetica*, "sometimes even the great Homer nods." And, if the greatest storyteller in Western Literature can occasionally fall asleep or stumble a bit, surely a young upstart from a tiny town in Texas can have a glitch or a misstep here or there.

But, playing off of Horace's famous quote, Alexander Pope in his "Essay on Criticism" defends Homer by urging — as quoted in the second

epigraph to this essay — that it is more often the case that the receiver of the narrative is *asleep* than that the creator has made a misstep. Pope urges that what may appear to be a flaw to the hearer or reader may actually be part of the author's careful plan. This possibility too will be taken into account as I vivisect some of Howard's writings. I use the term *vivisect*, since *dissection* is done on dead things and the critic can't really do harm to the life of a tale, which is re-inspired with vitality every time it heard or read and is, potentially, as is true of the lasting works of Homer, in that way "immortal."

In my stylometric studies of Howard's prose (which are in the primitive stages of initial

investigation and the formulation of preliminary hypotheses), I have noted some trends and patterns, some “typical brush strokes” — as I have elsewhere called them — of Howard’s style. In earlier contributions of this journal and in one essay¹ I have noted things such as Howard’s tendency to use “action packing,” often done through the use of sentences with compound action verbs and through what I’ve called “hypermodification” (the piling up of adjectives and adverbs, even though such practice is often discouraged by theorists on narrative writing — witness Samuel Clemens’ “If you can catch an adjective, kill it.”) He also tends to use the “Action Introduction,” to jump into action rather than scene setting or character development in a more slowly-paced development, but this is not uncommon in modern fiction, in fact becoming the norm. These things, along with what I’ve termed *prosyndeton* (the greater-than-usual use of conjunctions like “And” and “But” to begin sentences— taken literally, from the Greek: *pro* “before/beginning” and *syndeton* “conjunction”) and Howard’s tendency to use such rhetorical figures as the *tricolon* (parallel series done in threes like Caesar’s “Veni, vidi, vici.” or Lincoln’s “... of the people, by the people, for the people”). But these I commented upon with praise and not merely observation. These things, it seems to me, WORK for Robert E. Howard’s style and for the effect of his stories. The present discussion will focus upon some things that DON’T WORK — or at the very least are suspect about some tendencies (and, later, exemplifying this with a few specific passages) in Howard’s literary creations.

In one of the hypotheses I’m developing, the greater-than-normal tendency (and it’s the “norm” that I’m trying to get a statistical handle on) of Howard to use proper names rather than pronouns, to use, for example, a greater than “normal” percentage of “CONANs” or “CONAN’Ses” and comparatively very few “HEs” or “HISes” is, I believe, ultimately verifiable as a “marker” of his style, part of his *DNA* (my translation of that acronym is: “Distinctive Narrative Attributes”).

But it’s not the fact that he seems to use the proper name rather than the pronoun more than other writers that I see as a problem or flaw in his work. It’s the proper names themselves that are the problem.

Robert E. Howard was not consistently good at name creation (what I’ll call “onomatopoesis” [Greek *onoma* “word/name” and *poesis*

“creation”]— which relates directly to the fairly well known *onomatopoeia*, which also means “name creation” but which has come to specifically mean “making a word that makes the sound it represents” —as heard in words like “swish,” “clunk,” “buzz,” and even “ring”).

Certainly, it would be unfair to compare Howard to Tolkien, for example, since Tolkien’s names — both for places and people are consistently derived from the ancient languages that Tolkien studied deeply and professed as a *philologist* (literally, a “lover of words” — today a “linguistics expert”). Tolkien’s names, like *Gandalf* (from Old Norse, “Magic Elf”), *Frodo* (from Old English, *frod* “wise”), Middle Earth (from Old Norse, *Midgard* and Old English *Middangeard* — quite literally that “Middle Earth” between Heaven and Hell — or like *Aragorn* from Old English *ar-* / *ageornian* or “glory / to yearn” making Aragorn the “yearner after glory,” the son of Arathorn (literally the “loser of /one bereft of glory). The same is true of the names of Tolkien’s dwarves, for example. Thorin, Gimli, Gloin, Balin, etc. These are straight from the Old Norse *Elder Edda* of Saemund Sigfussen. And the great reawakened king of the Rohirrim, Theoden, has a name which means, in Anglo-Saxon, simply “king.” His great hall is Meduseld, Anglo-Saxon for “mead hall.”

But pretty much all fictioneers will pale in comparison to Tolkien in the practice of Name Creation (*onomatopoesis* as I have termed it).

Howard succeeds with many of his names — fortunately, he usually succeeds with the names of primary characters. Conan, Kull, Bran Mak Morn, Solomon Kane, and Breckenridge Elkins all “fit” very finely.

Also, when Howard springboards off of names from the historic past, there is some virtuosity and flair when he does simple and clear mutations from the historic originals. Names such as *Stygians*, *Cimmerians*, *Hyperboreans*, and *Picts* are, of course, adopted whole cloth — Howard’s creative talents showing in the ways he intermingles historical data available in his day with his own creative modifications. In coinages like *Iranistan*, the *Zhaibar Pass* [Khyber Pass mutated?], *Afghulis*, *Yasmina* [from Jasmin] etc., Howard not only shows some definite skill at adapting history into what I’ve elsewhere called his *mythomorphic* (myth/legend/history reshaping rather than *mythopoeic* [myth creating]) fantasy. But these touches add to the narrative and help create the belief that Howard wants of an ancient past that

was somehow lost to us and which these tales are now revealing. In this too, he succeeds.

But, while he is not so great an offender as Howard Phillips Lovecraft in creating jaw-breaker names,² the fault of Howard that I'm addressing in this first installment on this theme is his tendency to come up with some simply awful amalgams of letters that definitely don't "roll off the tongue" [but which are certainly qualified to "roll downhill" (allusion intended)]. Others still don't seem to fit with the particular setting (neither locationally nor ethnically) of the story at hand.

While not listing them all, some of the first group of cacophonous stinkers (all from the Conan stories) include: Agha, Akkharim, Altaku, Aphaka, Bakhauriot, Bhalkhana, Burganets, Ctesphon, Gwaweli, Jehungir, Jhumda, Kheshatta, Khorotas, Khrosha, Khurakzai, Rahksha, Schohirans, Skandaga, Skukeli, Tsotah, Vendhyans, Xaltotun, Xuthalla, Yildiz, Yogah, Zaporaskan, Zahaemi, and Zhaibari

One thing that makes most of these problematic is the seeming lack of cognates with any modern or ancient language.

This *cognate-relevancy* Tolkien achieved, not merely consistently but masterfully, infusing the resultant names with levels of meaning that can be "felt" by the reader even if not always fully aware of the cognate with modern language. The name of the great horse Shadowfax is taken directly from Old English *sceadu/feax* or "Shadow Mane" [parallel to the Old Norse mythological horses of Day and Night, *Skinfaxi* and *Hrimfaxi* ("Shining Mane" and "Rime" {or "Frost"} "Mane")].

Thus, Tolkien imbues the name of his creation with, not only linguistic significance, but with deep mythic associations.

Now, not every author can be expected to know as much about language and the derivation of words or be as proficient with multi-language etymologies as Tolkien, but Howard, I believe follows often too closely into the pattern of Lovecraft's *onomatopoetic* [again, "name creating"] extremes like *Nyarlatheptep*, and *Yog-Sothoth*, simply for the sake of creating an odd-sounding name—and sometimes names so odd-sounding that the reader must pause and ask "How in the Hell is that pronounced?" or "What kind of a name is that?" Thus the story "magic" is shaken a bit, the name draws attention to itself as a word and also draws attention to the fact of the author, thus to something OUTSIDE the narrative, and the "Secondary World"³ we had previously been drawn

into is, to whatever extent, blurred or flawed—however briefly.

An equally significant problem with Howard's naming is often that, when there might be some semblance of a relationship geographically between the hyper-antiquity of Conan's world and the ancient or modern world we know historically, there is a disconnect between the place and the languages or families of language that might be associated with it. I'll call these instances of *anatopism* [like *anachronism*, except a misplacement in spatial and not in temporal setting (Greek *topos* = "place")]. We see this clearly in "Red Nails" were ancient Mezzo-American-sounding names like Techultli, Tlazitlans, Tolkemec, Xuchotl, Xotalanc occur in a hyper-ancient location clearly remote from the eventual actual land of the Olmecs, Aztecs or Mayas. These names, while exceedingly odd, are unquestionably interestingly creative attempts at Archeo-Mezzo-American names, but the story loses some verisimilitude due to the fact that they are, as I have dubbed them, *anatopisms*.

With a few of these names, Howard comes close to good accord with time or place [what might, from the be called *alethichronism* and *alethitopism*, respectively: Greek *aletheia* = Truth].

In the case of the Greek suffix *-phon* seen in Howard's Ctesphon, King of Stygia, he is close, but there would be a vowel ahead of the last syllable in the actual ancient language, and the "Ct" word opening achieves a sense of foreignness, but it's achieved by a sacrifice on the altar of pronounceability. There is a bit of likely proper Slavic sound in words like Zaparoska [the "sk" especially].

And occasionally, Howard directly hits the mark as with the clearly and properly Egyptian-derived:

"Look! This dried, shriveled thing on the altar was once Thothmekri, a high priest of Set, who died three thousand years ago. He was an adept of the Black Ring." (my emphasis)

And Howard scores also in the nice melding of the Howard-created *hyperantiquity* of Conan's world with the historical antiquity seen through the names in this passage from "Queen of the Black Coast":

"What of your own gods? I have never heard you call on them."

"Their chief is Crom. He dwells on a great mountain. What use to call on him? Little he cares if

men live or die. Better to be silent than to call his attention to you; he will send you dooms, not fortune! He is grim and loveless, but at birth he breathes power to strive and slay into a man's soul. What else shall men ask of the gods?"

"But what of the worlds beyond the river of death?" she persisted. "There is no hope here or hereafter in the cult of my people," answered Conan. "In this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle; dying, their souls enter a gray misty realm of clouds and icy winds, to wander cheerlessly throughout eternity."

Belit shuddered. "Life, bad as it is, is better than such a destiny. What do you believe, Conan?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"I have known many gods. He who denies them is as blind as he who trusts them too deeply. I seek not beyond death. It may be the blackness averred by the Nemedian skeptics, or Crom's realm of ice and cloud, or the snowy plains and vaulted halls of the Nordheimer's Valhalla. I know not, nor do I care. Let me live deep while I live; let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate, the hot embrace of white arms, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flame and crimson, and I am content. Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content."

"But the gods are real," she said, pursuing her own line of thought. "And above all are the gods of the Shemites — Ishtar and Ashtoreth and Derketo and Adonis. Bel, too, is Shemitish, for he was born in ancient Shumir, long, long ago, and went forth laughing, with curled beard and impish wise eyes, to steal the gems of the kings of old times.

"There is life beyond death, I know, and I know this, too, Conan of Cimmeria"—she rose lithely to her knees and caught him in a pantherish embrace—"my love is stronger than any death!"

Howard's "Nordheimer's" (literally "North Homers"—those of/from the North), the gods of the "Shemites" (clearly cognate for "Semites" here) "Shumir" (for "Sumer) and the recognizable names of the goddesses Ishtar, Ashtoreth [variously Astarte], and gods Adonis [as Tammuz, Ishtar's lover whom she saves from the underworld, parallel, of course to Isis and Osiris], and Bel — all these work well for him. He certainly doesn't "nod" here.

Another thing that's noteworthy in Howard's naming tendencies is the inclusion of the letter "h" after consonants—thus forming what must properly be pronounced as an "aspirated

consonant"⁴ [the way linguists describe it]. The list of "cacophonous" names, I've given above clearly demonstrates this tendency. Aspirated consonants are not present in English, and, while Howard achieves "oddsoundingness" [yep, I've got a Greek word for this too: *xenophone*⁵ (pron. As four syllables, accented on the second, the last "e" is long) literally *xeno*- "foreign" and *phon*- sound] with most of his names, the difficulty in the attempt to pronounce fully too many of them result in, I contend, undue difficulties for the reader. Combined with things like the *anatopisms* I've noted and the downright ridiculousness and tongue-twistingness/tongue-twistingness [my Greek would be: *glossastrophe* from *glossa* "tongue" *stophein* "to twist or turn"—rhyming nicely with "catastrophe"] of a few of the names, I think Howard's naming can often be seen as flawed, the poorly-crafted names detracting from the narrative.

NOTES

¹ "Texas Talespinner: Robert E. Howard's Ways With Words." in *Two-Gun Bob*.

² HPL's purpose was, of course, to create concoctions so not-of-this-world that the name too would seem as completely alien as his "Old Ones" of "eldritch" and "cosmic" malevolence]

³ See Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories" for a discussion of his theory of "Subcreation" and the distinction between "Primary" and "Secondary Worlds."

⁴ One interesting, but highly unlikely, possibility regarding Howard's tendency to include the aspirating "h" after consonants in his names is the fact that the 6000-years-ago base language of almost all European (and some other) languages—what scholars call Proto-Indo-European—is distinguished by its heavy, almost ubiquitous use of aspirated consonants (as reconstructed by linguists — there are no written records of PIE, being pre-historic) which dropped away from most modern languages derived from it. Interestingly, one language group which has kept many of these aspirants is Celtic including Irish Gaelic and Scots Gaelic. The Irish name Sullivan is spelled in the Gaelic *Súilleabháin*. That "bh" is an aspirant of the type that doesn't appear in English.

Perhaps some student of Howard's (and/or of Celtic) might find some significance here in Howard's tendency to aspirate his created names.

I'm going to try to track down all that Howard had to say on naming.

⁵ The Greek historian Xenophon's name means the same—"foreign sounding."