

You Are What You Remember

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 21 Apr 1999

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Mitchell A. Bailey — 21 Apr 1999, 14:45

In the vein of this ongoing "Death & Memory" discussion, I had noticed there seems to be a motif or idea running through B/UNS and some other Wolfe works as well relating memory and resurrection or immortality. It could be expressed roughly as follows:

Perfect Transference of the memories = Transference/resurrection of the Self.

Apparently Mr. Wolfe is exploring the idea that if all the memories of sentient entity A are transferred perfectly and in toto to entity B, Entity A for all intents and purposes lives in B. If B had no mind or memories to begin with, then B = A.

The best New Sun example might be Severian himself in UNS. Not just once, but twice (at least), Sev describes dying and then opening his eyes and sitting up in a new aquastor body, which subsequently 'solidifies'. The Sev who fell down the Ship's air shaft or was clubbed to death by his adoring Inca worshippers would be "A" in the memory/self transfer, and the new aquastor-body which awakens would be "B". Narrating in the first person, the Sev who eventually retires to the bower by the beach on Ushas (perhaps prevailing upon Odilo's descendant to keep bringing him libations of margarita with little paper umbrellas? <g>) and writes the memoir we received as UNS is, at most, someone who received the memories of someone who received the memories of Severian the torturer-who-became-Autarch. Yet from this Sev's point of view there was no real change or significant discontinuity.

And this seems to properly happen only when A is dead and B comes or is restored to life. Recall the Hierodules' admonition in UNS as Sev is revived in Apu-Punchau's tomb: "Our idolons are always of the dead [or the not-yet-born, as on the planet of Yesod]. Have you not wondered why? Be warned!". Or Chatelaine Thea "It is said that memories thus held together may amaze the mind". Right. One of the consequences of course is a thorny plot/theme complication.

Other examples of this idea in B/UNS:

Thecla living again in Severian (induced by Vodalus' alzabo, but hallowed by the Claw), BNS

The predecessors' memories installed in a reigning Autarch, BNS

Other aquastors (Malrubius in BNS, the others in the Hall of Testing in UNS), who seem to have been constructed from the memories Sev had of them.

the rite of alzabo as practiced by Vodalus' party, BNS

the memories subsumed and exploited by the living alzabo of its prey, BNS. Becan and Severa "haunted the dim thicket of the beast's brain, and believed they lived".

could the near-drowning with which Sev commences the narrative have been an actual

drowning followed by an eidolonic substitution of the same sort? (by whom? Abaia? Why?) I don't particularly believe in that idea, but it raises interesting questions. B/UNS keeps referring to that incident and the idea that someone died in Severian's place in some sense or other. Also, if one is hunting Christ-parallels, I would propose that incident as the analogue of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Baptism is said to symbolize death, particularly the 'death ' of the 'old man of sin' as one is 'born again'.

There are other examples of this idea to be found outside the "New Sun" milieu:

those pitiful techno-revenants of "The Packerhaus Method" (ugh! Better Damnation Through Chemistry!)

maybe, the Mainframe "Gods" of LS. Presumably Typhon and his brood still lived when the Whorl was launched, but from the viewpoint of its inhabitants he was dead and gone.

and, of course, good ol' Mr. Million in 5HC

(on the other hand poor old Latro of "Soldier of the Mist" seems almost to be a nonperson at times as his struggle with his crippled memory keeps him in a permanent identity crisis, as it were)

I'm sure other examples might exist in those Wolfe works I haven't read yet.