

# Digest urth.v028.n079

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 06 Nov 1999

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Jeremy Crampton — 06 Nov 1999, 12:10

<<<<I really can't think of any instances (other than things that are just odd--who said what on page #1) where Severian outright lies.>>>>>>>

Aren't we forgetting to distinguish between Severian's lies to us, the privileged reader, and his lies to the other characters? The number of lies and deceptions in this latter category is fairly significant. In the larger sense, Severian has cast his narrative into the ocean of time for people to read, and that is why Clute is so correct to call it a "confession". But even while confessing, he makes further lies.

Here are some lies or deliberate deceptions that in my opinion Severian makes in only the first two chapters of *Shadow* (Timescape paperback):

Lies to others:

p. 8 claims to be a Vodalarius to Vodalus himself and since V. might not believe this, further claims that there are "thousands" of Vodalarii of which V. is unaware (confession to us: he'd in fact hardly heard the term at all) p. 16 pretends to drink the hot drink provided him

Lies to the reader:

p. 2 perfection of his memory  
p. 3 again, claims perfect memory  
p. 4 "I had almost died that day". In fact, he did die, but does not reveal the full truth at this point. [Later dives for his skull in vol 5]. p. 9 (chap 2) another claim about his memory p. 9 "I have never known my father or mother" but later in chapter possibly remembers his mother (p. 15 lying in a cell on his back he hears a woman crying) p. 11-12 incomplete truth about the person in the mausoleum and why it looks like him (I would say this is a narrative deception to provide foreshadowing and gradual revelation of Severian's story--a "lie" by Wolfe then)

Lies to himself:

p. 7 "half pretends" that he is executing "miserable vagrants" for Vodalus, who are "less valuable than cattle" (p. 14).

And don't forget some lies by others:

p. 3 Drotte to leader of volunteers about being physicians' gallipots and collecting herbs (several good ones).

Also don't forget that Severian without hesitation murders a man he considers to be "stupid and innocent...a laborer"!

Other people might dispute some of these or select different examples, and certainly the examples I've chosen are not equal in importance. But the point is that it's surprisingly easy to find examples. The other point is that Sev. is often very honest, even to the detriment of our image of him (eg., p. 9 tells us the only value he absorbed from his guild was loyalty to it, which

makes his eventual betrayal of it such a tough thing to do).

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Jeremy W. Crampton <http://geog.gmu.edu/jcrampto> at [gmU.edu](mailto:jcrampto@gmu.edu) Dept. of Geography & Earth Science [MS 1E2] 'Tis true; there's magic in the web of it. George Mason University --Othello (III.iv.69) Fairfax, Va 22030

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Alex David Groce — 07 Nov 1999, 14:32 · follows Jeremy Crampton

What Wolfe is doing with the tea-lady is to give us her view of science thru teleological eyes ie., that science destroys wonder (a common anti-evolutionist claim to this day). When the ballooning of the cathedral tent can be explained by the hot air from the fire which was started by Severian's crash, this for her, misses the point, which is to see the Hand (of God) in nature. She isn't calling for a miracle, but that the event should send us to God, not to the explanation. We modernists in turn reject her viewpoint, eg., viz. Dawkins last book "Unweaving the rainbow : science, delusion and the appetite for wonder" which I believe argues that scientific understanding is what truly leads to wonder and respect for evolutionary explanation.

Yes, although from my brief skim, Dawkins does so in poor fashion--I disagree with Dawkins on (most) things, but usually he's at least an honest battler, heading straight for his target--here he dodges around the fact that his own ideas would tend to reduce Mozart & Keats to, well, specious memes of dubious survival value.

An interesting point with respect to Wolfe here is that a lot of the 18th century natural theologians, and earlier thinkers, rested much of their argument on the beauty and charm, if you will, of nature--the pleasant aspects of the design. CASTLE OF THE OTTER puts forth Wolfe's claim that part of the inspiration of BOTNS was to (heavily paraphrasing) approach natural theology from another side--pain and torture as indicative of the existence of God. I suppose, to show God's presence not just in butterflies and little lambs and such, but, Book of Job-fashion, in the alzabo and various Leviathans of Urth's oceans (Abaia & co., who would be equally tricky to draw out with a hook).

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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Michael Straight — 07 Nov 1999, 17:42 · follows Alex David Groce

What Wolfe is doing with the tea-lady is to give us her view of science thru teleological eyes ie., that science destroys wonder (a common anti-evolutionist claim to this day). When the ballooning of the cathedral tent can be explained by the hot air from the fire which was started by Severian's crash, this for her, misses the point, which is to see the Hand (of God) in nature. She isn't calling for a miracle, but that the event should send us to God, not to the explanation.

I don't think "destroying wonder" quite captures the complaint of the tea-lady. Rather I think she's pointing out that sometimes scientific "explanations" don't really explain.

It's as if we were to find a man murdered and exclaim "How could this have happened?" and the Scientist were to tell us "You see, a bullet entered his brain and caused it to cease functioning," and expect our curiosity to be satisfied.

Actually, I don't think that example quite captures it either, but it's the best I can come up with for now.

-Rostrum

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Jim Henley — 07 Nov 1999, 22:37 · follows Michael Straight

-----Original Message-----

From: urth-errors at lists.best.com [mailto:urth-errors at lists.best.com]On  
Behalf Of Jeremy Crampton

<<<<I really can't think of any instances (other than  
things that are just odd--who said what on page #1)  
where Severian outright lies.>>>>>>>>

Aren't we forgetting to distinguish between Severian's lies to us, the  
privileged reader, and his lies to the other characters? The  
number of lies  
and deceptions in this latter category is fairly significant.

Which tells us little about his reliability as a narrator, assuming that we really are  
\_distinguishing\_ between the two types of lies.

But even while confessing, he makes further lies.

Zat so? [Continued . . . ]

Lies to the reader:

p. 2 perfection of his memory

p. 3 again, claims perfect memory

Only a lie if a) it's not true, and b) he knows it's not true. Aside from the Roche/Drotte thing,  
there's been little to demonstrate a) and nothing, IIRC, to demonstrate b).

p. 4 "I had almost died that day". In fact, he did die, but does  
not reveal  
the full truth at this point. [Later dives for his skull in vol 5].

Since he didn't know. Remember, BotNS was completed "by Sev" before the events of URTH  
ever happened. In this sense URTH can't even really be called "vol 5." It's volume 2.

p. 9 (chap 2) another claim about his memory

Which falls afoul of the same problems as the earlier ones when it comes to proving that Sev  
"lies."

p. 9 "I have never known my father or mother" but later in  
chapter possibly  
remembers his mother (p. 15 lying in a cell on his back he hears a woman  
crying)

I'm sorry, this is merely a simulacrum of evidence, despite the reassuring specificity of page  
numbers. Here's what the passage of page 15 actually says. The context is that Sev is narrating  
his "near-death" experience in Gyoll. He is not actually in a cell at all, he is in the water  
\_hallucinating\_ that he is in a cell.

"Yet he could not see far enough. I was in one of the  
cells below the examination room. I lay there on my  
back, looking up at the gray ceiling. A woman cried  
but I could not see her, and I was less conscious of  
her sobs than of the ringing, ringing, ringing of the  
spoon. Darkness closed over me, but out of the darkness

came the face of a woman, as immense as the green face of the moon. It was not she who wept . . . They grasped me, pulled me up, then flung me down, away from her face and from the sound of sobbing, down into the blackness until at last I struck what I took to be the bottom mud and burst through it into a world of light rimmed with black." [Ellipses mine. Readers are invited to determine for themselves if the text I've left out damages my case. I say it does not.]

Note: There is nothing in the text to demonstrate that "a woman" constitutes a memory of Sev's mother. Sev must have heard women crying in cells all his young life. (He as much as tells us this.) Even the cell is a vision. It's entirely possible that his unconscious has dreamed up a "motherly" sound out of imagination or a memory that predates the beginning of his remembered life. (My earliest memory dates to about age 3.) But even if that were the case it would in no way invalidate Sev's claim to have never known his parents. If he doesn't remember them, his report is truthful to the extent of his knowledge.

And if you want to use the idea that Sev "forgets" his parents as evidence that he's a liar, familiar problems reassert themselves:

1) We know that people tend not to remember things from very early in their childhood. In that context, Sev's claim of perfect memory is to be understood as perfect memory "since his memory was switched on."

2) If Sev thinks he has perfect memory, he's not lying.

p. 11-12 incomplete truth about the person in the mausoleum and why it looks like him (I would say this is a narrative deception to provide foreshadowing and gradual revelation of Severian's story--a "lie" by Wolfe then)

Is there anything to demonstrate that Sev knows the complete truth about the mausoleum before the events of URTH? This is a genuine rather than rhetorical question.

Lies to himself:

p. 7 "half pretends" that he is executing "miserable vagrants" for Vodalus, who are "less valuable than cattle" (p. 14).

Talk about your unreliable narrators! <g> The three quoted phrases are amalgamated out of order into a spurious whole. And what makes any constituent part a lie? Are they not vagrants? (No proof.) Are they not miserable? (I'd be pretty miserable if I found myself constituting Sev's business for the day. Otherwise, he's not doing it right . . . ) Are they more valuable than cattle? (Says who? You? Me too! But that doesn't mean Sev does.) Is his pretense greater or less than half? (How would we know?)

And don't forget some lies by others:

p. 3 Drotte to leader of volunteers about being physicians' gallipots and collecting herbs (several good ones).

But what in the world do lies by others have to do with Sev's veracity as a narrator?

Also don't forget that Severian without hesitation murders a man he considers to be "stupid and innocent...a laborer"!

Which has what to do with honesty, precisely, as opposed to general niceness? Wait, I think I know - the fact that Sev doesn't try to come up with a reason why the guy deserves it, thus making himself look better, tends to confirm his honesty rather than disproving it.

Other people might dispute some of these or select different examples, and certainly the examples I've chosen are not equal in importance.

But about equal in probative value . . .

But the point is that it's surprisingly easy to find examples.

This is the critical equivalent of throwing mud and hoping some of it sticks, IMHO. And that (it is pretty obvious that I am bothered) is what bothers me.

The other point is that Sev. is often very honest, even to the detriment of our image of him (eg., p. 9 tells us the only value he absorbed from his guild was loyalty to it, which makes his eventual betrayal of it such a tough thing to do).

And here I agree.

Best,

Jim

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"There will always be Costello/  
a little larceny Bacharach,  
in everyone" "My Thief"