

Liars, TWHF

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 17 Nov 1999

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Roy C. Lackey — 17 Nov 1999, 01:45

Two instances where Severian admits to lying have already been given (I,III and IV, XXXV); below I will give a third.

First, an instance where he acknowledges his memory isn't perfect:

After returning to the Ship after his phony "trial", Sev tells his story to Big Tzadkiel, the ship's captain. She offers to take away the memories of all his hard travails. He declines: "I don't want to forget, Tzadkiel. I've boasted too often that I forget nothing, and forgetting--which I have known once or twice--seems to me a kind of death." (V, XXIV) This quote establishes from his own mouth that his claim to a perfect memory is a boast, not a fact, and that his boast is lie.

The subject of lying is an integral part of the conversation Sev has with banished Small Tzadkiel in the chapter "The Brook Beyond Briah". After again telling his story to this version of Tzadkiel he adds: "But you, who are my reader, know all these things (if indeed you exist), because I have written them here, omitting nothing, or at least very little." This is his admission that he has deliberately left things out of his story. Note that he doesn't say that he has left out only unimportant details--that much is obvious--just that he has omitted to relate some things. Indeed.

At the conclusion of his tale she says:

"No wonder I accepted you; in all those words there was not one lie."

"I've told lies when I thought there was need of them, and even when there was none."

She smiled and made no answer.

I said, "And I'd lie to you now, mighty Hierogrammate, if I thought my lies would save Urth."

How much plainer can he be? He lies when he finds it expedient and he lies just for the hell of it. How many times does Wolfe have to write it? Severian is a liar. He is like all those oh-so-dangerous-people who are absolutely convinced that they are Right; *they have no scruples* when it comes to establishing what they think is Right--especially when they have the power to impose their beliefs on others. He admitted to her face that he has lied and will not hesitate to do so again. She *knows* he has lied to her; that's why she said not *one* lie, and only smiled when he told her of his lies, like an indulgent mother to a willful child. Who knows how many lies he has told? There's no way to know because his manuscript *is* tantamount to literary solipsism; there's nothing to check it against.

She knows all about lying because she/he/it isn't any better. She asks him what is seen, in the plowman's view, in comparable places on Urth to where they are now at the Brook Madregot. Sev finally gives the answer she wants: "wild things". She is, herself, a "wild thing" banished to the Brook between Briah and Yesod. Why was she banished? Because she is the rogue element of the Hieros, the Dionysian principle spurned by the Apollonian, just as was the case for mankind when they strove to be as gods, just as Cyriaca told Severian.

Sev wants to return to Urth nearer the time when the New Sun will arrive. She says: "And you want my help." She paused to stare at me with as serious a face as ever I was to see her wear. "I've many times been called a liar, Severian, but I would help you if I could."

Now who, exactly, would be in a position to call an angel-like being a liar? Why would anyone do so? That, at least, is obvious; because they lie. Severian was lied to at every turn by agents of Yesod. And the last thing he heard of Small Tzadkiel was her mocking laughter ringing in his ears.

Rostrum wrote:

[snip]

TWHF also attempts to answer the question of why God, if he exists, does not simply show himself to us, but the book is much less overtly Christian than Lewis's other fiction. I think it's a great story, but would be interested to know what folks who aren't Christians think of it.<<

It's been 25 years or so since I read it, and my memory isn't the best, but as a non-Christian I still liked it.

Roy

Alex David Groce — 17 Nov 1999, 12:57 · follows Roy C. Lackey

(All re: Roy's post)

This interpretation of BOTNS can be supported from the text, with a lot of work, but I strongly disagree with it. It seems to me that you're seeing small and largely disputable points in Severian's narrative as evidence that

(A) Severian is a bald-faced liar and the narrative we have is not merely incomplete, but actually a complete distortion of actual events we can never, in any way, know, and (B) the cosmic plan outlined (why we should believe in it at all, I'm unsure--why not say Severian is a poor torturer's apprentice who, in a fever, dreams he is a savior of the world?) is in fact the work of what seems almost a fallen angel, or, perhaps, as others have stated some time ago on the list, a kind of sneaky colonization plan by Empire-builders from Yesod :).

As I argued before, this way lies complete literary solipsism--given that Severian acknowledges that he lies to other people from time to time (which strikes me as the admission of a fairly honest narrator) and that his memory is, I would argue, perfect enough that Severian certainly BELIEVES it to be accurate to call it perfect, and given the fact that at least some of the inconsistencies are pointers to the existence of more than one past for Severian (or more than one Severian, depending on how you look it)--this is a fairly difficult interpretation to reach. Ignoring the fact that from external evidence Wolfe didn't mean BOTNS/Urth to be an ironic examination of a liar's distortion of his past, it seems to break a general Occam's razor of narrative: before one interprets a narrator as unreliable to this extreme (willful lying, as opposed to incompleteness or misunderstanding), I think it's best to have MUCH stronger evidence than what has been given. Some of the points are certainly worth bringing up, and I myself have swung over more to thinking that Severian only has a VERY powerful memory, but imperfect, and only believes himself to have a perfect memory. However, I think the

extrapolation is unreasonable.

In fact, given this approach, I'm curious--could you elaborate on what you see BOTNS as "about," in this case? It strikes me that most of the underlying themes I see in it are undercut by this interpretation (which reminds me of the "Weer is a mass-murderer, and kills EVERYONE in Cassionville" version of PEACE).

The statement:

"He is like all those oh-so-dangerous-people who are absolutely convinced that they are Right; *they have no scruples* when it comes to establishing what they think is Right--especially when they have the power to impose their beliefs on others." would seem to be the heart of this conception, but I don't for a moment believe Wolfe meant to make such a cliched idea the heart of his masterpiece. Anyway, I have a feeling Wolfe is, to some extent, one of those "oh-so-dangerous-people who are absolutely convinced that they are Right", in the sense being considered here. I think the text makes it clear that despite the awful price, <the author> thinks that Severian was absolutely right to bring the New Sun's purging floods, and avoid the safe but ultimately dead future of "Ragnarok." Typhon's there for contrast, not as a mirror of the narrator.

(By the way, Tzad's laughter as Small Tzad strikes me as being possibly related to Chesterton's comment that the one thing never heard in the Gospels is Jesus' laughter, possibly because the humor of God is too awesome for us to behold.)

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

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Ouroboros — 18 Nov 1999, 09:05 · follows Alex David Groce

<<<<Severian is a liar. He is like all those oh-so-dangerous-people who are absolutely convinced that they are Right; *they have no scruples* when it comes to establishing what they think is Right--especially when they have the power to impose their beliefs on others...Who knows how many lies [Severian] has told? There's no way to know because his manuscript *is* tantamount to literary solipsism; there's nothing to check it against.>>>>

Gosh, you sound very sure of your opinion about those people as well as your take on TBOTNS. Hmmmm. Of course, that's natural, because thesis/anti-thesis is the only way human beings can reason regardless of their scruples. It's also the only method we have of divining reality from delusion.

What's my point? Well, while I agree that Severian's memory is far from perfect, I'm convinced Wolfe's memory (for the purpose of this work) *is* reasonably secure and objective.

I'm unconvinced you have found *any* lies yet. !BUT!
I don't believe you'll find a place where Severian

lies<< as the narrator where Wolfe doesn't provide a clear signal of it in the text. Otherwise, Wolfe would be permitting himself to play tennis without a net(to borrow an analogy from Robert Frost). Of course, if TBOTNS is "literary solipsism" how *could* you discern a lie, a delusion, or an objective fact (see the importance of thesis/anti-thesis?). Actually, TBOTNS seems to me more in the tradition of J. Bach rather than John Cage.

If you *can* convince me that TBOTNS is "literary solipsism", you can have my 5 hardback volumes, 'cause I won't be needing them anymore.

-Ouroboros

Daniel Fusch — 18 Nov 1999, 19:15 · follows Ouroboros

(snip)

There's no way to know because
his manuscript *is*
tantamount to literary solipsism; there's nothing to
check it against.

Literary solipsism????

What do you mean? How is the manuscript a solipsist document? I assume you're referring to solipsism in the moral sense and not existential solipsism.