

Stuff, Temptation

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 22 Nov 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1974>

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Roy C. Lackey — 22 Nov 1999, 17:46

Rostrum wrote:

Does Urth have rainbows? Did the Increate forget his promise to Noah? Or might this be a clue that Urth is not our world, but perhaps another (earlier?) iteration of the universe in which God did not promise there would be no more universal floods? Or maybe it's our universe, but the story of God's promise to Noah is false.

(Did we already discuss this question? It seems familiar, but I can't find it in the archives.)<<

Yes, we (I) did. V25, Sun, 18 Apr 1999, "Inire & the Flood"

Tony Ellis wrote:

When he writes that he lies to himself, the reader is given warning that all that he relates cannot be trusted to be true...

This is true, but I think it's just about as true of David Copperfield, Ishmael, the nameless narrator of THE BROTHER KARAMAZOV, the old "authorial persona as narrator," and Huckleberry Finn as it is of Severian.>

And Pip, and Holden Caulfield, and Graves' Claudius, and...

Yes. We take it as read, surely, that whatever a first-person narrator tells us is filtered through his own perceptions and prejudices. It's a game the author plays with the reader.

If this is all you mean by Severian "lying to us", then I say again, I'm on your side, Roy. But that's not what I personally would call it, and I don't understand why you're singling-out Severian for something every first-person narrator does.<<

None of those other narrators claimed to have a perfect memory. Both of his manuscripts are reconstructed from memory, in each case years after the events they relate. As others have pointed out recently, memory is dynamic, not static, and he has to "reconstitute" his memories when he writes of them. Even if we concede him an extraordinary ability to recall events, that recall is subject to the same malleability as any other human. Therefore, what he writes from memory is necessarily prone to unconscious editing, especially when it touches upon events which are invested with subjective import, and that's assuming no conscious deceptions regarding those things about which he lies to himself. It is his repeated insistence that his version of events, based on his memories, is the true and correct one which causes me to doubt him. Whether you call it lying, self-deception, wishful thinking, creative license or something else, his account strays from the truth.

Sev's memory has been cited as the primary--perhaps only--qualification he has to assume the mantle of Urth's Conciliator. He is supposed to have assumed the memories of his autarchal

predecessors, those memories diminishing in viability as they become more remote from Appian. Because neither Appian nor his predecessors had an eidetic memory, the memories he passed to Sev were subject to the normal degradations of time and the failings of the flesh. Thus, memories much beyond Appian's were, for the most part, so remote as to be inaccessible to Sev, possessing little more than dream-like substance. That is why he writes so little of them and has little ghosts of memory that he cannot flesh out. So, the notion that Sev was the legitimate Epitome of Urth because he was a walking memorial, a curator of the past like Rudesind and Ultan, Providentially endowed with a memoriousness stretching "backward, perhaps, to Ymar, and behind Ymar to the Age of Myth" is inherently flawed. If the Powers That Be choose to regard Sev as emblematic of his species on Urth, that choice is largely arbitrary if founded on Sev's memory.

The more emotionally involved he is (or wishes to appear; I see no evidence that he has any deep regard for *anyone* but himself; not even Thecla, because when he writes of her he *is* Thecla), the less reliable he becomes. Another example of his lying/faulty memory: When he saw Thecla in the Examination room Zak told him not to cry. He denied he was crying, then realized he was and wrote: "If I had ever wept before, it was when I was so small I can scarcely remember it ..." (V, XVIII) But when he left Dorcas in Thrax: "Just as when I had first left the Citadel I had pulled up my hood so that the passersby might not see my smiles, so now I hid my face to conceal the tears running down my cheeks." (III, XII) (I'm almost certain there is at least one other instance of him crying, but I can't recall it at the moment.)

The instances in the text where he admits lying about something are even more common than I thought. I've come across several more that I haven't posted; what's the point? People here just don't seem to want to hear of Sev being a liar. He's a murderer, a torturer, a thief, a coward, an adulterer, etc., that's okay, just don't call him a liar. I wonder; are there *any* of the Ten Commandments he *didn't* break? <g>

In another vein--when Sev went to the House Azure he saw a door with "...a stained-glass insert showing the Temptation." I take the allusion to be to the Conciliator rather than Christ. If so, and the Temptation refers to the scene where Typhon tempted Sev, then how did the story get into popular tradition to become a subject of artistic expression? Sev hadn't lived the scene yet, much less written of it. He wasn't even the Conciliator yet when it happened. What was it based on? Or, like Jesus's prayers in Gethsemane when there was no one awake to hear and record them, we're not supposed to ask?

Roy

Ron Hale-Evans — 22 Nov 1999, 16:10 · follows Roy C. Lackey

At 05:46 PM 11/22/99 -0600, you wrote:

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Time travel is tricky. It may be that at some point after the New Sun comes, Sev returns to the time of the Old Sun and recounts his story (in his role as Conciliator) to a believing audience. After all, how did

anyone know *anything* about the Conciliator when Sev was only a child? It may also be that

another "version" of Sev either underwent a separate temptation and/or described the Temptation to someone.

I am near the end of _Shadow_ in my most recent reading of TBOTNS; I will keep an eye out for answers to this question, which has puzzled me at times too. I'm a little vague on the whole aquastor thing, frankly.

Speaking of which, does anyone agree with my assessment that (a) Triskele was already dead, and is an aquastor from the moment Sev touches him and he opens his eyes, and that (b) it is likely that it is the aquastor Malrubius who is caring for Triskele on his forays away from Sev?

Ron H-E

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Tony Ellis — 23 Nov 1999, 11:02 · follows Ron Hale-Evans

And Pip, and Holden Caulfield, and Graves' Claudius, and...

Yes. We take it as read, surely, that whatever a first-person narrator tells us is filtered through his own perceptions and prejudices. It's a game the author plays with the reader.

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None of those other narrators claimed to have a perfect memory.

No, but they're assumed to have. They report conversations word-for-word, they tell us exactly what

someone was wearing twenty years after the event. We don't say "oh, so Pip has a photographic memory", but we also don't quibble and say "oh, he couldn't possibly be remembering all this perfectly."

Even if we concede him an extraordinary ability to recall events, that recall is subject to the same malleability as any other human.

Yes, any other human. But with fictional, first-person narrators, the convention is to overlook this malleability and assume that what the narrator remembers is what happened.

It is his repeated insistence that his version of events, based on his memories, is the true and correct one which causes me to doubt him.

Does Sev actually repeat this -that- many times? In any event, I really think that in this case this is

just a simple narrative device. GW loves 'em. His stories are written in journals, presented as dialogues, recorded in electronic devices, scribbled on a scroll with a lead stylus before the narrator

can forget them. In "I-Bem" the medium is the robot's own fading memory chips. In the case of TBOTNS,

instead of having to -assume- that a narrator has perfect recall when he reports every conversation and

event, as we have to do with every other first-person story, we have a narrator who really can

pull
off this trick.