

GWOT <> LB

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 02 May 2000

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 02 May 2000, 09:48

Away for three days and I've fallen far behind!

Adam's Questions

1. What is the function of the opening section, about Caspar Last? I can actually think of several possible functions: it provides a glimpse of our world; it's a prelude to the "original sin" of the Otherhood; it shows the difficulty of changing the past in a purposeful way; it lures the reader into thinking GWoT will be a typical changing-the-past story. But none of these justify, for me, the size and prominent position of this section.

Those are good functions. I'd also add the "red herring" of technical details (like the severe mass restriction, which on first reading seem to make later Otherhood operations impossible, but no, they've developed an advanced technique which remains vague). But for me, the most important function is to begin the big American/British dichotomy: Caspar Last is American (though you probably wouldn't know it until somebody mentions it later), and Denys is British.

2. When the old Denys is telling the young Denys (of our world) his story, after describing how he failed to kill Rhodes, he says "'I am satisfied in my own mind...that it cannot be possible to meet oneself on a trip into the past or future; that is a lie, invented by the Otherhood to forestall its own extinction, which was however inevitable.'" (131-32). Why does Denys think propagating the "lie" that one can meet oneself would forestall the Otherhood's extinction? Why does he think the Otherhood's extinction inevitable? And why does the old Denys not believe his older self dissuaded him from killing Rhodes, when he has the evidence that that is what happened? Does he just not want to admit that his current plight is the result of a considered decision on his part, rather than an impulsive act?

Okay, it gets complicated: I'm not sure what you are saying, so I'll outline my understanding of the situation. In the text our world seems to be what the Otherhood calls "Original Situation"; the world the Otherhood is making I call "CC" (for the "Cape-to-Cairo" railroad which figures so strongly); the world at the end of the text is neither OS nor CC, but a third situation I dub "C2."

So I take your opening statement as meaning: "When Denys CC (86 years old) is telling Denys C2 (23 years old) in the C2 world, after describing how he failed to kill Rhodes in CC/C2 1893, he says . . ."

On to the paradox itself. I hope it resolves cleanly as I've laid it out above: one cannot "meet oneself" because of one or more of the following: one's age difference means that an older version is a different self than a younger version (standard truism about age); the usual time-travel history eraser thing (meddling with your past self alters both); the multiple-timeline model (such monkeying around causes new worlds to emerge: OS became CC, CC became C2; each version of Denys is different enough to be outside of "self").

Then again, the text facts remain (if Denys CC [86 yo] isn't lying): the actual agent of change in CC 1893 (which caused the birth of C2) was a phantom lion (which suggests to me that the fairies of CC 2015 did it). This being the case, then it does support the claim that one cannot meet oneself, not because of any reasons I listed above, but just because that is a fact: like a law of physics.

As to why the Otherhood would want agents to believe that one could meet oneself, I'm not sure. To keep them focused on the big goal (creation of CC world); to keep time travel minimal and by design; etc. It seems that they wouldn't have blown it if they had followed their own rules and had not allowed Denys CC (33 years old) to go from CC 1993 to CC 2015, where he saw the results of the CC worldbuilding project and grew sick of it. Which began the unravelling.

Onward: next stop, "why I think GWOT is the opposite of LB."

LB is a union of Anglo-American fairytale stuff, elements which are quite different yet brought together into a seamless whole. A bit ambiguous at the end, but overall a glorious celebration of Fantasy. Ambiguity leaves room for hope and happiness.

GWOT uses science fiction to separate America and Great Britain into two hostile camps. The reader is urged to choose between one or the other, with constant goading towards the British side (third paragraph: "in an American sort of voice (for we are all Americans now, aren't we?)"); a few pages later, "The hotel in the capital was as he expected, shoddy-American and intermittently refrigerated" [I wonder how "American" that use of "refrigerated"?]. As the plot thickens, to the "American" side is added, on top of Coca-colonization, Big Macs, and all that, a heaping of Nazi Germany and the Jewish Holocaust--now which side is the reader going to choose?

Well ha-ha, which ever side you choose, you lose! No ambiguity there.

Often enough in time travel stories there is the "que sera sera" sort of moral: Lincoln/JFK must be assassinated, otherwise things will somehow get worse; likewise Hitler cannot be assassinated; Captain Kirk must persuade Dr. McCoy to let the foxy socialist babe die in the 20th century so that the Federation can exist in the future; etc. But as perhaps the only original thing GWOT brings to the rich subgenre, the ending is anything but Doris Day (or Once a Day, or Daily Alice): on first glance, it is "damned if you do, damned if you don't."

But no, it is actually even worse than that! See, in LB, Smoky has ideas, but does nothing (he is passive), and that seems sad; in GWOT, Denys tries very hard, suffers, and changes worlds (he is active), and it is worse. So a thread which I think runs through much of JC's work: the only thing worse than doing nothing (bad, sad) is doing something (very bad, very sad). Which is like a negative-version of the Tao, or something.

Anyway, GWOT uses sf to destroy fantasy (especially LB), implicate the authors/readers of fantasy (basically worse than Hitler, all of 'em), and destroy sf itself. LB is a wedding of opposites; GWOT is a war, a civil war, and a few genocides.

Finally! Reading GWOT outside of the context of NOVELTY might be as slippery/skewed as reading "'A Story' by John V. Marsch" outside of 5HC. (Or maybe not.)

=mantis=

Adam Stephanides — 03 May 2000, 00:12 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:

Adam's Questions

1. What is the function of the opening section, about Caspar Last?

[snip]

Those are good functions. I'd also add the "red herring" of technical details... [snip to avoid repetition] But for me, the most important function is to begin the big American/British dichotomy: Caspar Last is American (though you probably wouldn't know it until somebody mentions it later), and Denys is British.

Those are also good functions, although the American/British dichotomy is raised more pointedly in the very next section. I'm still not convinced the section deserves the size and prominence it has.

2. When the old Denys is telling the young Denys (of our world) his story, after describing how he failed to kill Rhodes, he says "'I am satisfied in my own mind...that it cannot be possible to meet oneself on a trip into the past or future; that is a lie, invented by the Otherhood to forestall its own extinction, which was however inevitable.'" (131-32). Why does Denys think propagating the "lie" that one can meet oneself would forestall the Otherhood's extinction? Why does he think the Otherhood's extinction inevitable? And why does the old Denys not believe his older self dissuaded him from killing Rhodes, when he has the evidence that that is what happened? Does he just not want to admit that his current plight is the result of a considered decision on his part, rather than an impulsive act?

Okay, it gets complicated: I'm not sure what you are saying, so I'll outline my understanding of the situation. In the text our world seems to be what the Otherhood calls "Original Situation"; the world the Otherhood is making I call "CC" (for the "Cape-to-Cairo" railroad which figures so strongly); the world at the end of the text is neither OS nor CC, but a third situation I dub "C2."

A technical nit to pick: actually the world at the end of the text is OS, or nearly so. As Denys C2 transmits Denys CC's explanation, it "restores" itself as the Otherhood's interventions fail to take place, and Denys CC's presence, which distinguishes C2 from OS, disappears from history. (135)

So I take your opening statement as meaning: "When Denys CC (86 years old) is telling Denys C2 (23 years old) in the C2 world, after describing how he failed to kill Rhodes in CC/C2 1893, he says . . . "

Yes.

On to the paradox itself. I hope it resolves cleanly as I've laid it out above: one cannot "meet oneself" because of one or more of the following: one's age difference means that an older version is a different self than a younger version (standard truism about age); the usual time-travel history eraser thing (meddling with your past self alters both); the multiple-timeline model (such monkeying around causes new worlds to emerge: OS became CC, CC became C2; each version of Denys is different enough to be outside of "self").

But Denys CC is denying that it would have been possible for Denys PT (as I will call the Denys who did kill Rhodes, became President pro tem, and visited the future) to encounter Denys CC in 1893. The reasons above are merely arguments, if such a meeting took place, it should not be called "meeting oneself."

Then again, the text facts remain (if Denys CC [86 yo] isn't lying): the actual agent of change in CC 1893 (which caused the birth of C2) was a phantom lion (which suggests to me that the fairies of CC 2015 did it).

He's not consciously lying, but as he himself suggests (131) the episode of the lion is a confabulation on the part of his unconscious. What really happened is what he dreams happened: Denys PT does meet him and dissuades him. That seems to me the simplest reading. If the fairies of 2015 did it, why did they tell Denys PT he had to do it? (Another alternative is that Denys CC has somehow unconsciously absorbed Denys PT's knowledge of the consequences of the Otherhood, in the same way that Denys C2 does later; and again confabulated the lion to explain his actions to his conscious mind.)

GWOT uses science fiction to separate America and Great Britain into two hostile camps. The reader is urged to choose between one or the other, with constant goading towards the British side (third paragraph: "in an American sort of voice (for we are all Americans now, aren't we?)" ; a few pages later, "The hotel in the capital was as he expected, shoddy-American and intermittently refrigerated" [I wonder how "American" that use of "refrigerated"?]. As the plot thickens, to the "American" side is added, on top of Coca-colonization, Big Macs, and all that, a heaping of Nazi Germany and the Jewish Holocaust--now which side is the reader going to choose?

I don't think the text is so loaded on the British side as all that. I never bought Davenant's sophistry about how it would have been better if Britain had helped the South win the Civil War. And the comment "He [Denys] believed implicitly that his Empire did not wipe out populations wholesale." (56) is surely irony directed at Denys. (Incidentally, while reviewing this conversation I noticed Davenant's reference to "the near genocide [in the American South] of the last hundred years." (56) Is this hyperbole, or does it indicate that in CC, African-Americans in the South in the first half of the 20th century were even worse off than in reality? The latter doesn't seem implausible; since the U.S. is poorer and weaker in CC, white Southerners might well have had more frustrations to take out on African-Americans.)

Well ha-ha, which ever side you choose, you lose! No ambiguity there.
[snip]

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To me it's simply saying that sometimes actions taken with good intentions can have bad consequences, a common theme of tragedy (and not something anyone can reasonably deny).

Anyway, GWOT uses sf to destroy fantasy (especially LB), implicate the authors/readers of fantasy (basically worse than Hitler, all of 'em), and destroy sf itself. LB is a wedding of opposites; GWOT is a war, a civil war, and a few genocides.

I'm not sure what you mean here. There is, I think, an implicit critique in GWOT of the love of archaic social hierarchies in much fantasy (something that has bothered me too). But to say it wants to destroy fantasy seems a considerable exaggeration. And I don't know what you mean by saying it destroys sf (the time-traveller whose actions cancel out time travel is itself an sf trope: see Ward Moore's BRING THE JUBILEE, and especially Asimov's THE END OF ETERNITY, whose plot GWOT basically cribs).

Finally! Reading GWOT outside of the context of NOVELTY might be as slippery/skewed as reading "'A Story' by John V. Marsch" outside of 5HC.
(Or maybe not.)

I might be able to agree or disagree if I had any sense what the context was. It's been a while since I read it, but as I recall I couldn't make head or tail of "In Blue" and found the first and last stories slight (though the first was rather charming).

--Adam