

Sev's memory

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 17 Aug 2000

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Jim Russell — 17 Aug 2000, 10:38

A. Aramini wrote:

One of my favorite lines in the whole Book of the New Sun (I'm sure this has been commented on before, but I haven't had the chance to peruse the old archives) is in The Citadel of the Autarch in Chapter V: The Lazaret.

An inane conversation with Loyal to the Group of Seventeen hides a wonderful statement by Severian.

They are talking about how the Ascians only speak with correct thought:

"'The rest have thousands- I suppose actually tens or hundreds of thousands - of those tags memorized.'

'That's impossible,' I said"

Even though it at first appears that Severian is denying that the society and its practices are possible, he is directly denying that anyone's memory could be that good.

What a great scene. In my mind, this is very condemning of Severian as a narrator, since he claims over and over to remember all those thousands of lines of his book that he will perfectly copy on the ship. He says several times that he cannot conceive of a memory that is less than perfect, yet here he is presented with simply good memory and denies that it can exist.

Actually, in Claw (Page 373 in the Masterworks edition) Sev says:

We cannot, a I have heard foolishly alleged, remeber everything. I cannot recall the ordering of the books on the shelves in the library of master Ultan, for example. But I can remember more than many would credit: The position of each object on a table I walked past when I was a child and *even that I recalled some scene to mind previously, and how that remembered incident differed from the memory of it I have.*

This last bit is tantamount to saying "Yes I have a perfect memory, and I can recall, perfectly, the times when my memory was imperfect." Therefore, in a very veiled way Sev is saying that his memory isn't perfect.

What interests me is the extent to which this inconsistency is not to do with Sev's status as unreliable narrator, but rather a part of the alterations being made by the Heiro's in the world around him. Did Severian originally not have sex with Thecla, for example, but when something was later altered he phased into a reality where he ha?. Or, mor obviously, did he just neglect to mention it?

Also, I'm very interested in the idea that The Book itself is an imperfect palimpsest. If we supposedly have in our hands the copy made by Sev on Tzadkiel's ship, how are we to know that that is the same as the original, a massive book written ten years earlier, when Sev cannot remember small details. Perhaps this accounts for the texts many inconsistencies.

Questions, questions...

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