

Skulls and Houses and Such

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 25 Oct 2000

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 25 Oct 2000, 16:42

Alex David Groce wrote:

... the lich and something else that I can't find right now (damnit, I need a searchable text version of Wolfe's work) suggest that Weer's "memory house" may also be his skull. That is, his ghost is haunting the interior of his skull as a house (and where, in life, his memory dwelled).

And these are pearls that were his eyes... I incline to the view that the house is his skull, also, but there is somehow too much physicality to Weer's "after"life for me to accept that there's no "memory house" at all. He feels physical pain, his feet pounding, the weight of the elm branches; hears the sounds of the weather; etc.

H'mmm. In searching for a reference to something I'll get to in a minute I just ran across this. He's talking about his Scout knife:

The bolsters -- those hard bolsters which, when my life was over and I had come to my desk, wore out so many gabardines and serges ... [17]

(Oh, yeah: page references to the Berkley ed'n.)

Interesting: his life was over when [or by the time] he came to his desk. Coming to the desk marked the end of his life? Or came after it? How and in what way did his life end? Are we to consider Weer, the President, as a walking-dead-man?

Okay... Way-out speculation: Did Weer die in the coldhouse prank, a young man; and is the rest of his "life" a China-pillow dream?

Probably not. But this passage will have to be dealt with.

Anyway, and this is what I was heading for when I found the above, it isn't until page 35 that Weer actually describes the memory mansion -- after he's well into his wanderings through memory. I suspect that a multilayered model is necessary to deal with all we know about Weer's house. My best inference right now is that he did indeed build a home. He probably included some "memory" rooms in it. But the house Weer dwells in at the time of narration is not the house he built, or not exactly. Primary evidence:

...I made the mistake, when the company at last came into my hands and I had funds enough to build, of duplicating, or nearly duplicating, certain well-

remembered rooms whose furnishings had fallen to me by inheritance. ...

I made the error of interspersing among the functional rooms of my home certain "museum rooms"; but when I try to recall where they lie -- or, for that matter, where the stairs are -- or the closet in which I once kept an umbrella, I find myself lost in a maze of pictures without names and doors that open up to nowhere. ... I remember the architect unrolling his blue plans on the table in the dining nook of my little apartment, and indeed he unrolled them many times there, for there were changes and consultations -- as it seemed then -- without end. I remember the squares and rectangles that were to be rooms, and his telling me over and over that those rooms that were to be without windows would be dark, despite the windows we had arranged for them in appropriate places, windows that would be curtained always, with diffused light behind the shades; or blocked -- for my aunt Olivia had arranged some of hers so, in imitation, I think, of Elizabeth Barrett -- with painted screens; or which would open on illusions like those of a puppet theater. But I do not remember their positions with reference to this long, walled porch on which I live, or even upon what floor they were. I should, I suppose, begin by going out, and walking all around the house, if I can, peering in through windows like a burglar while I note the damage winter has done. But it seems too much, too elaborate, for a man who only wishes to walk about in his own home, behaving as though it were the fun house at a carnival, a place in which all the walls not glass are mirrors. [35-36]

(Immediately after this passage, btw, Weer begins Dr Van Ness' battery of tests.)

Assuming that Weer is not actively lying (which may be an unwarranted assumption), he actually built a house (Sorry, Adam), with the help of an architect, with some "museum rooms." But the layout of this house, which we might expect him to remember well (and which indeed he seems to remember quite well) does not quite match that of the house he's currently "living" in. Because he believes the house he's in is the house he built, he is confused.

Given the physicality of the house, the presence of the elm tree, etc., I feel certain that the house Weer inhabits is
in some sense that house, overlaid with the "memories" in his skull.

This is part of a larger model I'm slowly building up here. Doug and, to some extent, Mantis, seem to have the view that there is no "correct" reading of PEACE. I am taking the contrary view that there is a correct and unified reading, but that things appearing as single items in the narrative may be more than singular: that the house is Weer's skull _and_ the "memory mansion" _and_ the physical house he built (and quite possibly haunts) ... and possibly Aunt Vi's house, also (thanks, Roy).

By the way, Weer wondering the stairs are reminds me that Wolfe has punned in at least one title on the "storeys" of buildings. Relevant? Who knows?

Vizcacha ponders the China Pillow story:

just as in the fable, Weer lives or dreams his entire life, seeing the consequences of the choices he makes, and then at the end Olivia wakes him to live it all over again as a wiser man. I don't see the point of including that story unless it speaks to something else in the novel, as all the other included tales do. What is its relevance to the novel, unless it is that?

Well, and it's a good question. The reference at the end is, "It is time, I think, that I see the enchanted headrest of the Chinese philosopher looming behind me, and I wait its coming." [246] Note that he does not say he sees it -- he desires to see it. Weer wishes to have his life to live over, but nothing in the text entitles us to believe that he will actually get that chance except in remembrance.

[The lich, and his cry, "O shades of the unborn years, depart from me..."? But the story of the lich is from Gold's forged Necronomicon. ... I want to follow that thought out a bit, though, because it haunts me every time I reread tBotNS. The tale of the lich, from the Necronomicon, is the one passage from any book of Gold's we actually hear: On the one hand, the Book of Gold is the Necronomicon (or at least the "book that binds the dead"); on the other, the Book of Gold is a forgery. I find myself unable to believe that this was not present in the mind of the author of tBotNS...]

Strewth, I don't have a good answer to the "meaning" of the China Pillow in PEACE. Yet.

Speaking of the China Pillow, Mantis wrote that

... it is also important to note the context of Olivia's story: it seems to be a strong message to Macafee for his "ungentlemanly" winning of the Chinese Egg ... the giver of the gift says, "Fool! Do you not recognize me? I have granted your heart's desire, and for it I receive your ingratitude!" And thereby ends the dream of a happy life by withdrawing the real gift.

I'm afraid I just don't see this. For one thing, she's giving an example -- to all present, not just Macafee -- of the kind of story she wants from her game of "spin-the-bottle;" for another... I think that the messages in the embedded stories are primarily messages to or for Weer. Often they appear to encode events not shown in the story, as the story of the Princess appears to encode information about Olivia's suitors.

What message then does the China Pillow yarn have for Weer? "Life is but a dream?" Ho-hum, I hope not -- even the slightly more interesting "This life you are leading, Alden Dennis Weer, is but a postmortem dream" would be banal beyond words.

Note to Dan'l: didn't you have a nice table showing all the nestings of stories in PEACE? Please post it here--I've somehow managed to lose my copy.

If I did, I've long-since misplaced it. But there's one in Doug's pamphlet; is that perhaps what you're thinking of?

Finally, Mantis also asked...

Since many of the streets have tree names, does this mean that Olivia's house is on "Elm Street" (which is not one of the given street names) and the other streets have their name trees along them, too?

I _sincerely_ hope not. If so, the China Pillow interpretation becomes irresistible, so we can say that it was all a dream... or rather a Nightmare...

Alex David Groce — 25 Oct 2000, 20:42 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Wonderful continuing PEACE discussion, everybody.

Some points of my own, taking off from Dan'l:

The bolsters -- those hard bolsters which, when my life was over and I had come to my desk, wore out so many gabardines and serges ... [17]

Hmmm... The desk is also, in my reading, the center of Weer's afterlife. The elements of his past life are nailed down on his desk as he comes to understand them. However, I agree that there is a conflation of Weer's skull, a memory palace, and quite probably a mansion he had built or modified from some other building (maybe Olivia's house). This all seems perfectly reasonable to me, but then I think that the notion of haunting one's own skull and memories and being perpetually within the shades of the significant architectures one has dealt with fits my experience of present life.

Also, the part that nails it down for me that the haunted house is in one sense Weer's skull in the grave is the part from the Lich passage that reads (p. 234 Orb edition): "...I knew this spark for the soul of the dead man, seeking now in all the chambers under the vault of the skull in its old resting places."

...I made the mistake, when the company at last came into my hands and I had funds enough to build, of duplicating, or nearly duplicating, certain well-remembered rooms whose furnishings had fallen to me by inheritance. ...

(rest snipped)

This seems to refer to memory also, on a figurative level. The things that Weer can barely bring himself to approach in his life even through the disguise of stories have become "museum rooms" in his memory. They are dark, without the windows of understanding. "Curtained" and "blocked" indeed. Also, the statement that "all the walls not glass are mirrors" ties in perfectly with Wolfe's theme, in PEACE and elsewhere that we ARE the stories we tell ourselves in our memory.

The Chinese pillow story may suggest that it is folly to desire to relive, to undo. The life Weer lives has, though he will not recognize it (at first, at least) been the result of his heart's

desire--the playing out of his wishes, however disastrous those desires have been. Rather than desiring to live them again, and differently, like the soldier in the story, Weer's role now is to understand those desires and escape from the prison of his skull. To me the indication of the ending is that he has at last fulfilled that goal, which is his final wish.

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

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