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The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 20 Apr 2001

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akt — 20 Apr 2001, 09:58

Adam asked:

on 4/15/01 6:36 PM, akt at attglobal.net at akt at attglobal.net wrote:

But the fascinating thing, for the few of us who have been following John Crowley's Aegypt series, is that the *author*, especially in -Daemonomania-, appears to be unreliable, in a *third-person* narration.

Since Ranjit has given us permission to discuss Crowley here, could you tell us what you're referring to?

Sure. Actually, if you still have the chapbook you were proofing, it's taken up a bit in the interview. But here goes. The device of the unreliable narrator is nearly always (maybe always) found in first-person narration, and it is useful for indicating that the narrator is deluded (Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.") or an outright trickster (Agatha Christie's -The Murder of Roger Ackroyd-) or perhaps has changed personality (Marsh in 5HC or Horn/Silk; Wolfe is devoted to this device, uses it everywhere). The Aegypt series is written in third-person from various points of view, mainly that of Pierce Moffet, who may be a deluded soul but is not attempting to delude us. John Crowley, though, is playing tricks with reality, especially in the third book of his series. Maybe the clearest example is when Pierce reminds Spofford (a shepherd) of how they first encountered each other, Spofford with his hat and crook. Spofford says, no, he doesn't use a crook, never has owned one. So we curious readers page back to the first book of the series--uh-oh, Spofford had a crook! In another place, Pierce has a sort of daydream of a kind of porn-movie orgy that he really did go to some time ago and imagines his current girlfriend Rose as the (masked) central figure of the movie. And then Rose herself seems to remember the scene. Was she there before Pierce put her there? At another point, the author himself seems to appear, at another we readers also seem evoked. Etc.

There is method in this madness. Underpinning the series is the notion that history, or reality, is not straightforward, that there are points in time when we can actually change things. One of these crux periods was the early Renaissance when alchemy was still thought to be part of science (Bruno and John Dee illustrate this) and another is the present (the countercultural 70s), a period when quite a lot of people, certainly the sorts of people that JC is writing about, felt that they were on the cusp of the Age of Aquarius, or whatever. JC posits that these crux periods are blown in and out by enormous winds that seem to fray the fabric of reality. Thus he wants to show that fabric being frayed, and he does this by changing "history" or his story. This happens mostly in the third book, -Daemonomania- because by then we are much further into the crux time. By the fourth book, which will take place in our own time, 2003 or so, this crux will be long over for the characters.

Does this explain? If you haven't read the books, it probably doesn't. This is not a literary technique that should be messed with unless you know exactly what you're doing, and even

then it's risky. The risk is, as with other post-modern techniques, that readers will get fed up with you and your artful ways.

Someone asked what a chapbook was. I've discovered that quite a lot of people don't know, so here's the OED definition; the word dates back only to the early 1800s: "A modern name applied by book-collectors and others to specimens of the popular literature which was formerly circulated by itinerant dealers or chapmen, consisting chiefly of small pamphlets of popular tales, ballads, tracts, etc."

-alga