

Selves and Souls under Suns: a Sermon or Summary of Sorts

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 28 May 2002

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 28 May 2002, 19:53

A reading from EXODUS:

After a monent of silence, [Mint] added, "You've lost your faith, or most of it, I think. What's happened to us?"

Potto laughed loudly.

Quetzal, seated between Oosik and Loris at the other end of the table, murmured, "Circumstances have changed, Maytera. That's all, or nearly all. There is an essential core at the center of each man and woman that remains unaltered no matter how life's externals may be transformed or recombined. But it's smaller than we think."

Silk nodded his agreement.

"If I - ah - permitted." Remora pushed back the errant lock of lank, black hair. "The General and I were companions in, um, adversity. The - ah - spirit. The inalterable core, as His Cognizance has, um, finely. The spirit that survives even death. It grows when trod upon, like the dandelion. I have learned it, eh? So may you, if you -um - reflect."

I think this is the key passage for one of the things LS, and indeed the whole Lupiverse cycle, is about: the nature of the self and the soul. Quetzal makes the key point, and receives support from both Silk and Remora: that the "essential core," i.e., the "soul," is "smaller than we think" ... meaning, I suggest, that much of what we think of as our "self" or "identity" is not a part of the "soul."

The Lupiversal approach to identity and to souls seems to me very much motivated by a desire to make clear just what the soul is not. I mean that, in a universe where a whack on the head can radically alter personality, where is there a place for the immortal and immaterial soul? Similarly, in a world where certain neurological disorders can cause a person to be incapable of the freedom to make certain types of moral choice*, is that person damned for his or her immorality? Is the "soul" something separate from the body, or just an epiphenomenon of a certain level of behavioral organization (and, if the latter, how is a "resurrection" possible)? And does it have anything to do with what we normally consider our self or identity?

* Start with simple intellectual incapacity, move up to Tourette's and certain rare epilepsies, and go on from there...

Beginning with The Book of the New Sun, we have been presented with a series of physical phenomena that radically question our usual concept of personal identity: the Revolutionary;

the alzado and its related analeptic; the serially resurrected Severian; his very different "mergers" with Thecla and the line of the Autarchs; the aquastors; robots and chems, taluses and Talos; the gods of Mainframe; their ability to possess and "enlighten"; Mucor; the inhumis; the uncountable Neighbors; and the very mysterious nature of the Narrator of tBotSS.

I don't know that we can draw any really solid conclusions from this -- indeed, I'm not at all sure that Mr Wolfe has a clear theory to offer -- but I think it's clear that this _question_ is one of the fundamental things that he has been grappling with through much of his career, not only here but in, at a bare minimum, 5HC and the "Soldier" books.

All of which is kind of "why I _DO_ like Short Sun."