

Sev's not-so-perfect memory

The Urth list — 24 messages, 13 voices, 10 Jul 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4078>

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Roy C. Lackey — 10 Jul 2003, 04:32

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Those recollections, when they are of an incident which has been related elsewhere in the text, can be verified by the careful reader, but not so those of which we are given only the transient memory, such as piling pebbles, crying in a basket, or those subsumed from Thecla. This second category of memory becomes even more suspect, in light of the provable errors of the first category.

Sev's mistakes of memory tend to go unnoticed because the reader, caught up in the story, becomes spellbound by it, like some of the denizens of the Botanic Gardens, succumbing to Wolfe's wizardry as a story teller and his sleight-of-hand and stage-magician's misdirection in his plotting. Wolfe's style of writing is one of the reasons it is often hard to find a particular passage, because the reader doesn't associate it with the context of the story where it is actually found, e.g., that of Gurloes being a master for twenty years is found in the middle of Sev's account of his escape from the mine of the man-apes.

In addition to the errors I have pointed out in the past (not going/going swimming, not returning/returning to the mausoleum, etc.), or that others have found (doeskin/manskin bag, Roche/Drotte seeing the pikes, etc.), here are some more. Although most of the errors of memory are of details, there are too many of them for them all to be Wolfe's mistakes. I have endeavored to include only those of which there can be no reasonable doubt. There are, of course, others subject to interpretation.

A) "Whatever I possess I would give to become one of you, who complain every day of memories fading. My own do not. They remain always, and always as vivid as at their first impression, so that once summoned they carry me off spellbound.

"I think I turned from the innkeeper and wandered into the crowd of pushing rustics and chattering vendors, but I saw neither them nor him. Instead I felt the bone-strewn paths of the necropolis under my feet, and saw through the drifting river fog the slender figure of Vodalís as

he gave his pistol to his mistress and drew his sword." (II, I)

That's not quite what happened. He gave the pistol to Hildegrin, from whom Thea then took it. (I, I) However, the same mistake he makes above is repeated by Wolfe in the appendix to CITADEL.

B) Shortly after returning to Saltus from the mine of the man-apes, Sev questioned Jonas:

"One last question," I said, "and then I promise I won't ask you anything more. When we were going through the Wall, you said the things we saw in there were soldiers, and you implied they..." (II, VIII)

No, he didn't. Sev specifically asked Talos what the creatures in the Wall were, and it was Talos who answered him, saying they were soldiers. (I, XXXV) That Jonas doesn't bother to correct him _may_ indicate the error is Wolfe's, not Sev's.

C) While camped, with Dorcas and Jolenta, by the stream where the odalisque appeared, Sev slept, woke, and:

"...lay down again to watch the birds voyage among the constellations and enter that world of memory that, no matter how sweet or how bitter it may be, is never wholly closed to me.

"I sought to recall that celebration of Holy Katharine's day that fell the year after I became captain of apprentices; but the preparations for the feast were hardly begun before other memories came crowding unbidden around it." (II, XXVII)

Here, we have an example of Severian the deceiver. He goes on to recall an incident from infancy, which captures the reader's attention and distracts from what he wrote. The first part of the last quoted sentence is worded so that the casual reader may not realize that he is referring to his

own feast day, when he became a journeyman. Why he chose to phrase it that way, I will not speculate upon. The second part of the sentence sounds innocent enough--someone recalling a sequence of events and beginning at the beginning. But when Sev in fact described that feast day, when he reached the point in the ceremony where he raised the fake sword to strike, he wrote:

"When I think back on that time, it is that moment I recall first; to remember more, I must work forward or backward from that. In memory it seems to me I stand always so, in gray shirt and ragged trousers, with the blade poised above my head." (I, XI)

The second sentence in the above second quoted passage I included because it, too, I believe, contains an error. When Sev gave his brief account of the feast day when he became captain of apprentices, he wrote:

"We apprentices were to serve the feast, and before we did so were to doff the relatively new and clean clothes we had been given for the ceremony." (I, V)

The clothes worn by the apprentices for the ceremony were their version of their "Sunday best". If they had been their normal rags, there would have been no need to change clothes, so I doubt that Sev was wearing "ragged trousers" for his own elevation.

D) When Sev first visited the jacal of the two sick children in Thrax, he wrote:

"I braced my hands on the mud and wattle wall beside the door and straightened up. The boy

said, 'You see she is very sick, sieur, My sister.' He held out his hand again.

"I saw it--I see it before me now--but it made no immediate impression on my mind. I could think only of the Claw; and it seemed to me that it was pressing against my breastbone, not so much like a weight as like the knuckles of an invisible fist. I remembered the uhlan who had appeared dead until I touched his lips with the Claw, and who now seemed to me to belong to the remote past; and I remembered the man-ape, with his stump of arm, and the way Jonas's burns had faded when I ran the Claw along their length. I had not used it or even considered using it since it had failed to save Jolenta." (III, III)

Wrong. The second paragraph contains not one, but two errors. Sev touched the uhlan's forehead, not his lips, with the Claw. (II, XIII) And he used the Claw again on the broken arm of the herdsman at whose hut they had stayed. (II, XXIX; last paragraph)

E) From the top of the donjon at Acies Castle, Sev recalled the view he had had from the top of the Matachin Tower:

"When I had gone there to make my farewell to the only place I had known, I had stood at one of the loftiest points of the Citadel, which was itself poised atop one of the highest elevations in the whole area of Nessus. The city had been spread before me to the limits of vision, with Gyll traced across it like the green slime of a slug across a map; even the Wall had been visible on the horizon at some points, and nowhere was I beneath the shadow of a summit much superior to my own." (III, II)

Contrast the above quote with what he actually wrote about the view from the top of the Matachin Tower:

"The mountains [to the north] I could see with my mind's eye, but not with the body's: only the rolling expanse of the city with its million roofs. And to tell the truth, the great silver columns of the Keep and its surrounding spires blocked half my view." (I, XIII)

Either he had a panoramic vista from the tower, or he didn't. Perhaps his memory of home became idealized in his exile. Neither did he make any mention of being able to see the Wall from there at the time, though he did say, later, as they approached the Piteous Gate: "I've spent my life so near the middle of the city that the Wall was no more than a dark line on the northern horizon when we looked from the glass-roofed room at the top of our tower." (I, XXXV) Note that he said the Wall was visible only at the one point, not "some points".

F) When Sev and his motley crew of lake people arrived at Baldander's castle, he:

"...asked--a rhetorical question--if they knew from where the sky ship above the castle had come. And when they assured me they did not, I explained that I did (and so I did, Dorcas having warned me of them, though I had never seen such a thing before), and that because of its presence here it would be better if I...". (III, XXXII)

Well, no, Dorcas didn't say any such thing. She made no mention of a spacecraft or its occupants. It was Cyriaca who had warned him: "...that cacogens had landed somewhere in the north." (III, XII; first page)

G) Sev to Miles-Jonas at the lazaret:

"But Jonas, Jolenta is gone--I watched her die, and..." (IV, VI)

No, he didn't. He was passed out in the mud when he was awakened by Dorcas calling him. He

returned to the roof of the tomb to find "...Dorcas, alone, bent over the body of Jolenta." (II, XXXI)

H) Of his jungle prison cell, following the flier crash, Sev wrote:

"I, who had worked outside so many, thrusting in trays of food to the disfigured and demented, now knew again a cell of my own." (IV, XXVI)

Not true. Sev was a journeyman-in-good-standing for less than 72 hours, and apprentices were forbidden interaction with "clients". Apprentices carried trays for the inmates down to the oubliette, but it was up to the journeymen on duty to disperse them. In fact, the day Sev returned from the library with the four books, Drotte was busy with a client and asked him to "...finish shoving their food at the rest for me, if you've got a moment."

"I hesitated. Apprentices were not supposed to deal with those committed to the guild's care." (I, VII)

The same objection applies to what he wrote three pages later, when Agia visited him and "...described the torments she and Hethor had contrived for me when I was strong enough to endure them. When she finished, I told her quite truthfully that I had spent most of my life assisting at operations more terrible..." That is a lie, both to Agia and the reader.

BTW, it also means that Gurloes was probably lying when he said that when he was Sev's age, they had him "cranking the alternator".

I) On the morning that Sev, then autarch, passed through the necropolis, with Drotte, Roche, and Eata, on the way to see Ouen, he wrote:

"The death roses I had hesitated to pick for Thecla still showed a few autumnal blooms, and I found myself thinking of Morwenna, the only woman whose life I have ever taken..." (IV, XXXVII)

Not true. From chapter XX: "One of the enemy put her head from behind a clump of brush some way up the slope. My contus struck her with a bolt of flame; she leaped by reflex, then curled up as spiders do when someone tosses them among the coals of a campfire."

J) During the blackout aboard Tzadkiel's ship:

"In my youth, when I had traveled from Nessus to Thrax with Dorcas, and from Thrax to Orithyia largely alone, I had carried flint and steel to kindle fires." (V, VI)

Wrong again. Oddly, for all the dearth of detail in his accounts, that specific lack is addressed in the accounts of both those legs of his journey. By the stream mentioned in C), above, and when he found the dead soldier, Miles:

"We had broken a good many and laid our fire before I remembered I no longer had my striker, having left it with the Autarch, who must also, I felt certain, have been the 'highly placed servant' who had filled Dr. Talos's hands with chrisos. Dorcas had flint, steel, and tinder among her scant baggage, however, and we were soon comforted by a roaring blaze." (II, XXVII)

"...I had the impulsive need to kindle a fire.

"There had been no fire-making gear in his pack, but I knew every soldier must carry such things. I searched his pockets and found a few aes, a hanging dial with which to tell time, and a flint and striking bar." (IV, II)

K) Sev, just before his "Examination", having cried upon seeing the eidolon of Thecla:

"If I had ever wept before, it was when I was so small I can scarcely remember it--apprentices learn not to..." (V, XVIII)

He wept when he left Dorcas in Thrax. (III, XII) He wept when he found, among the rocks below Baldander's castle, the remnants of the gem which had held the Claw. (III, XXXVIII) He wept in the autarch's pavilion when he saw the claws of the cat-women. (IV, XXIV)

-Roy

James Wynn — 10 Jul 2003, 07:24 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Bravo, Roy!

Excellent detective work. I believe you are right about this, and apparently others suspected it as well (<http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0028/0443.shtml>). You see, my reporting of history -- my claim that Bill's query got no reaction from the list -- is not so accurate either, but then, Crush was not there to remember it).

-- Crush

----- Original Message -----

From: "Roy C. Lackey" <rlackey at stic.net>

To: "urth" <urth at urth.net>

Sent: Wednesday, July 09, 2003 10:32 PM

Subject: (urth) Sev's not-so-perfect memory

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-Roy

--

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 10 Jul 2003, 16:04 · follows James Wynn

Roy,

Two points: one general, one nit.

The general point: In most of the (apparent?) contradictions you list, you make an interesting assumption ... you cite Sev talking about an incident, then say that what he says is wrong, because it contradicts what he said in his direct narration of the incident. The point here is, what is your basis for thus privileging the direct narration, when both are from the same source (i.e., Sev)? If I were to privilege one over the other, I would be more likely to go the other way -- he's more likely to "edit" the incident when he's attending directly to it, rather than when he's attending to some other incident in which the incident in question is mentioned in passing. This would be especially true, I think, when the passing mention is in reported dialogue; it might not occur to him to edit the reported dialogue to match the edited incident.

The second point has to do with the Feast of Holy Katherine.

The contrast between his own feast, with "gray shirt and ragged trousers," and the "relatively new and clean clothes [the apprentices] had been given for the ceremony" strikes me as just that -- a contrast. It isn't a contradiction; it's a fact of the ceremony. The apprentice to be raised is not among the general run of apprentices that day; he is participating in a ceremony in which he is changed, from prentice to journeyman. Part of the symbolism of the ceremony -- pardon me if I am belaboring the obvious -- is the taking off of the garb of the prentice and the donning of the fuligin cloak of the journeyman. (In particular, recall that the journeyman never wears a shirt under his cloak.) Thus it would be appropriate, even necessary, for those being elevated, and only them, to wear ragged clothes.

James Wynn — 11 Jul 2003, 00:50 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Blattid disagrees:

Roy,

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Crush butts in:

I'm not sure I understand your point, O Leggy One. I don't think Roy favored one incident over another. The point is that Severian tells one version at one point and another elsewhere -- frequently just at the point where he brags about his flawless memory. The point is that one or both versions must be wrong. No, Severian doesn't "edit" out the discrepancy. The conceit seems to be that he doesn't edit his book at all -- relying on his inerrant memory to carry him through at all times.

Or perhaps his memory IS flawless (this is a Wolfe novel after all so it would make sense if the narrator's lies were to be somehow true), and his memory is "reconstituted" continuously as he says on page 2 of tSotT just before making his first error. So every version is somehow true. I do think that curly-wurly sentence is somehow (although I don't KNOW how) a true explanation of Severian's "memory" (if it can realistically be called that).

Whatever, I still think the long ago comparison between Cugel's (of "The Dying Earth") and Severian's brags is valid.

-- Crush

matthew.malthouse — 11 Jul 2003, 06:54 · follows James Wynn

On 11/07/2003 01:50:42 James Wynn wrote:

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Or perhaps his memory IS flawless (this is a Wolfe novel after all so it would make sense if the narrator's lies were to be somehow true), and his memory is "reconstituted" continuously as he says on page 2 of tSotT just before making his first error. So every version is somehow true. I do think that curly-wurly sentence is somehow (although I don't KNOW how) a true explanation of Severian's "memory" (if it can realistically be called that).

Random thought: What is the process for creating a new Severian when the old one carelessly dies? Occasionally we see a corpse, but more often not. If the heirodules are tampering with time in order to produce the "right" result might both recollections be true? True that is for the current incarnation of Severian?

Thus Severian's claim to perfect memory could be accurate but it's different worlds that he's remembering.

Now the obvious flaw in this is that it isn't third person historical narrative but the conceit of the book is that he writes - or copies from memory - the manuscript that we are supposedly reading between boarding the Ship and casting the casket overboard. How many times does he die in that time? Not at all as far as I can remember but certainly not a sufficient number of times to account for all the discrepancies thus far noted. How many times might he have died in the course of writing the original manuscript? We can't tell because his life as Autarch isn't in the narrative.

Which tangentially brings up something else. Are there not at least two and possibly more mechanisms by which Severian is incarnated? From memory it seems that we only get embarrassing bodies left behind after Severian boards the Ship. Thus the reincarnation is explicit whereas before it had to be inferred. Possibly a third mechanism might exist post-trial, during his return along the stream of time.

Matthew

Roy C. Lackey — 11 Jul 2003, 07:56 · follows matthew.malthouse

Crush quoted and wrote:

Blattid disagrees:

Roy,

In most of the (apparent?) contradictions you list, you make an interesting assumption ... you cite Sev talking about an incident, then say that what he says is wrong, because it contradicts what he said in his direct narration of the incident. The point here is, what is your basis for thus privileging the direct narration, when both are from the same source (i.e., Sev)? If I were to privilege one over the other, I would be more likely to go the other way -- he's more likely to "edit" the incident when he's attending directly to it, rather than when he's attending to some other incident in which the incident in question is mentioned in passing. This would be especially true, I think, when the passing mention is in reported dialogue; it might not occur to him to edit the reported dialogue to match the edited incident.

Crush butts in:

I'm not sure I understand your point, O Leggy One. I don't think Roy favored one incident over another. The point is that Severian tells one version at one point and another elsewhere -- frequently just at the point where he brags about his flawless memory. The point is that one or both versions must be wrong. No, Severian doesn't "edit" out the discrepancy. The conceit seems to be that he doesn't edit his book at all -- relying on his inerrant memory to carry him through at all times.

Crush said it for me. Perhaps all of the discrepancies I and others have pointed out over the years are just mistakes made by Wolfe. He makes mistakes. But Wolfe is also subtle. He causes Sev to go out of his way to boast "...that I have not scrupled to recount in great detail things that transpired years ago, and to give the very words of those who spoke to me, and the very words with which I replied; and you must have thought this only a conventional device I had adopted to make my story flow more smoothly. The truth is that I am one of those who are cursed with what is called perfect recollection." (II, VIII)

That sort of braggadocio is almost a gauntlet thrown down. Sev makes that sort of boast several times, yet gives contradictory accounts of the same recollections. That much is fact. I don't think that anyone on this list has ever maintained that Sev wrote the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth as he knew it. He clearly deceives, if only by omission, so the question comes down to: are the demonstrated errors of recollection subtle clues left by Wolfe as unspoken commentary on Sev's veracity, or did Wolfe make that many mistakes?

-Roy

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 11 Jul 2003, 17:04 · follows Roy C. Lackey

I didn't see Crush's original post.

Blattid disagrees:

Roy,

In most of the (apparent?) contradictions you list, you make an interesting assumption ... you cite Sev talking about an incident, then say that what he

says is wrong, because it contradicts what he said in his direct narration of the incident. The point here is, what is your basis for thus privileging the direct narration, when both are from the same source (i.e., Sev)?

Crush butts in:

I'm not sure I understand your point, O Leggy One. I don't think Roy favored one incident over another.

By calling one "wrong," it seems to me that he implies that the other is "right." My point is that I don't see any justification for that; in fact, I think that it may be undecidable, when Sev gives contradictory accounts, which is "true."

The point is that Severian tells one version at one point and another elsewhere -- frequently just at the point where he brags about his flawless memory. The point is that one or both versions must be wrong.

I'm not as sure that this must be true. Consider the Narrator's ability to change a story as it's being told. Now, I think we can agree that Severian is at least as close to omnipotent as the Narrator; we know that Severian is a timewalker; and we know that Severian claims that there have been previous versions of himself. I think we should at least consider the possibility that Severian, in telling his story, actually changes his history.

Alternatively, he could be lying (or wrong) about his memory.

Alternatively, he could be telling the truth about his memory, but the nature of memory (not only his) may be more complex than it appears at first glance.

Alternatively, he could be lying about some of the incidents -- which was my point about which version is more likely to be "edited" to suit his purposes (whether they be political, propagandistic, historical, or merely egotistical).

Crush said it for me. Perhaps all of the discrepancies I and others have pointed out over the years are just mistakes made by Wolfe.

That strikes me as the least likely hypothesis in general (though it may be correct in any given case).

"...The truth is that I am one of those who are cursed with what is called perfect recollection." (II, VIII)

That sort of braggadocio is almost a gauntlet thrown down.

Agreed.

That much is fact. I don't think that anyone on this list has ever maintained that Sev wrote the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth as he knew it. He clearly deceives, if only by omission, so the question comes down to: are the demonstrated errors of recollection subtle clues left by Wolfe as unspoken commentary on Sev's veracity, or did Wolfe make that many mistakes?

Or might it be that Wolfe is implying something more complex...

Blattid asserts:

That [all the discrepancies are mistakes on Wolfe's part] strikes me as the least likely hypothesis in general (though it may be correct in any _given_ case).

Crush agrees:

I'm with you on this, Blattid. Especially the first and most glaring discrepancy -- that of whether Drotte or Roche mentioned the pikes. As has been said before, The first couple pages are the part of any novel that is most likely to be pristine. For this to have slipped through unnoticed would dismay me.

Blattid goes on:

By calling one [description] "wrong," it seems to me that he implies that the other is "right." My point is that I don't see any justification for that; in fact, I think that it may be undecidable, when Sev gives contradictory accounts, which is "true."

Crush attempts to clarify:

Granted. But for Severian to boast about his infallible memory and then give contradictory accounts about trivial details, it questions his account of his memory and his level of self-delusion about it far more than his general account of the events.

Blattid suggests:

Alternatively, he could be lying about some of the incidents -- which was my point about which version is more likely to be "edited" to suit his purposes (whether they be political, propagandistic, historical, or merely egotistical)...so the question comes down to: are the demonstrated errors of recollection subtle clues left by Wolfe as unspoken commentary on Sev's veracity, or did Wolfe make that many mistakes?

Crush responds:

That Severian is lying about these things strikes me as less likely than that they are typos (and I don't think it is likely _as a whole_ that they are typos). The discrepancies at issue are just _too_ trivial -- too trivial to lie about, but not too trivial to prove Roy's point. If the discrepancies were about big things, it would be obvious to argue that Severian was lying or covering up the truth. But what reason is there to lie about whether Drotte or Roche mentioned pikes?

With each discrepancy discovered close to a claim of inerrant memory, the likelihood of any of them being typos decreases as well.

-- Crush

Adam Stephanides — 12 Jul 2003, 14:25 · follows James Wynn

on 7/11/03 5:02 PM, James Wynn at the.wynns at usa.net wrote:

Blattid asserts:

That [all the discrepancies are mistakes on Wolfe's part] strikes me as the least likely hypothesis in general (though it may be correct in any _given_ case).

Crush agrees:

I'm with you on this, Blattid. Especially the first and most glaring discrepancy -- that of whether Drotte or Roche mentioned the pikes. As has been said before, The first couple pages are the part of any novel that is most likely to be pristine. For this to have slipped through unnoticed would dismay me.

What convinces me is the number of discrepancies Roy has found, rather than any specific one. We know that Wolfe is a careful writer; if he were going to create a character who really had a perfect memory, he would surely have cross-checked the character's later recollections of events with the original accounts.

Blattid suggests:

Alternatively, he could be lying about some of the incidents -- which was my point about which version is more likely to be "edited" to suit his purposes (whether they be political, propagandistic, historical, or merely egotistical)...so the question comes down to: are the demonstrated errors of recollection subtle clues left by Wolfe as unspoken commentary on Sev's veracity, or did Wolfe make that many mistakes?

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Also, if Severian really had a perfect memory, and intended to lie, wouldn't he have remembered to lie consistently?

All of which raises the question: what is the point of making Severian an unreliable narrator? For that matter, what is the point of making Horn the not-necessarily-reliable narrator of TBotLS, or Horn's family the unreliable authors of the third-person sections of RttW? None of these seem to fulfill any obvious function in their respective novels.

Marc Aramini wrote:

What does it matter if Severian has an almost perfect memory as opposed to a perfect one?

It's a small point, but if Severian doesn't have a perfect memory, there's no reason to think he has an almost perfect one. The only reason for thinking he had a perfect memory was that he said so. (It's been a while since I last read the books, though; are there any scenes where his great memory is objectively validated?)

--Adam

--Adam

Josh Geller — 12 Jul 2003, 16:31 · follows Adam Stephanides

On Sat, 2003-07-12 at 07:25, Adam Stephanides wrote:

What convinces me is the number of discrepancies Roy has found, rather than any specific one. We know that Wolfe is a careful writer; if he were going to create a character who really had a perfect memory, he would surely have cross-checked the character's later recollections of events with the original accounts.

In a fifteen hundred page book?

Without a computer?

No one, as far as I know, is arguing that Gene Wolfe has a perfect memory.

Chris — 12 Jul 2003, 19:34 · follows Josh Geller

Also, if Severian really had a perfect memory, and intended to lie, wouldn't he have remembered to lie consistently?

On some occasions I believe that Severian changes his mind about what he's going to tell you as he goes along. It seems like he is reticent on the subject of Thecla early on, but later finds that in order to tell his story he can't hold certain things back after all. For sins of omission he probably wouldn't feel obligated to go back and fill things in earlier- thus you get surprising revelations about events that you thought you understood well after they are first recounted. However, even when it comes to the lies, while he may have remembered full well that his account isn't going to match, there are reasons he might not go back and correct them. First of all, he was writing a manuscript; it's not quite so easy to go back and make a significant revision or rewrite, and he may not have had time to do such revisions. Another possibility which may seem odd is that there are things Severian may want the reader to know, but hesitates to say directly either from squeamishness or because he won't be believed if he says it outright.

All of which raises the question: what is the point of making Severian an unreliable narrator? For that matter, what is the point of making Horn the not-necessarily-reliable narrator of TBotLS, or Horn's family the unreliable authors of the third-person sections of RttW? None of these seem to fulfill any obvious function in their respective novels.

Possibly just to make things interesting. But it also occurs to me that there are some points which can be made far more effectively if you give the reader the tools to figure them out for themselves. Especially concerning matters of religion or philosophy.

It's a small point, but if Severian doesn't have a perfect memory, there's no reason to think he has an almost perfect one. The only reason for thinking he had a perfect memory was that he said so. (It's been a while since I last read the books, though; are there any scenes where his great memory is objectively validated?)

I suppose it's a matter of how much of the narrative you want to reject. By thinking of him as having an almost perfect memory, you leave open the possibility that he is simply mistaken rather than outright lying to you. If there were nothing special about his memory, there's no way he could simply be mistaken. This isn't "evidence" that he has an almost perfect memory, but it is *a* reason to believe it.

Civet

Andrew Bollen — 13 Jul 2003, 07:31 · follows Chris

Josh says:

In a fifteen hundred page book?

Without a computer?

No one, as far as I know, is arguing that Gene Wolfe has a perfect memory.

FWIW, I agree with Josh. Roy's list of errors are easily explained as Wolfe nodding, IMO. Go through any series of large books by anybody, and you'll probably find the same. I'm reading Trollope at the moment - a similar effort for his body of work would probably fill a volume the size of one of his big, fat novels.

James Jordan — 13 Jul 2003, 21:34 · follows Andrew Bollen

Perhaps this point has been made, but what is even more striking about the contradictions is that this is the SECOND time Sev. has written this, and evidently the SAME Sev. Wouldn't he catch these errors the second time through?

Which makes we wonder if they really are errors. I'd have to look at all of them carefully, and I'm not rereading the books now. Is it possible both other boys pointed out the pikes, maybe one first and the other saying, "Yeah, look!" Is it possible Vodalus handed his weapon to one person with the intention of its being handed on to a third? Are some or all of these contradictions reconcilable?

Maybe not. But given that they all seem to be "small" errors, it makes me wonder.

Nutria

James Jordan — 13 Jul 2003, 21:41 · follows James Jordan

At 02:31 AM 7/13/2003, you wrote:

Josh says:

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FWIW, I agree with Josh. Roy's list of errors are easily explained as Wolfe nodding, IMO. Go through any series of large books by anybody, and you'll probably find the same. I'm reading Trollope at the moment - a similar effort for his body of work would probably fill a volume the size of one of his big, fat novels.

BUT, Trollope wrote for serialized publication. The first part of a given book or series was in magazine print before the later parts were even written, as I understand it. Wolfe worked over the New Sun books FOUR times before initial publication. I can tell you that I myself check earlier chapters more than once for consistency while I write, and go over my whole book more than once after it is all finished. I don't write fiction but Bible commentary (fiction to some, here, I suppose!), and when I find something "new" to talk about in chapter 10 of, say Daniel, I make sure what I wrote about chapters 1-9 is consistent with it. I think we should assume that usually the errors are deliberate and ask IF they really ARE errors (my previous post), and if so, what they might mean.

Nutria

--

Andrew Bollen — 13 Jul 2003, 23:18 · follows James Jordan

Nutria says:

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As an ex-computer geek, I think of it like debugging - there's always some left, no matter how carefully you check. I sort of appreciate the serialization point, but it doesn't seem to me that there's that much difference - presumably a serializer will also check against earlier chapters?

One of my problems with Roy's list representing deliberate "errors" is just their triviality - I find it hard to think that most of them could mean anything much.

matthew.malthouse — 14 Jul 2003, 07:09 · follows Andrew Bollen

On 13/07/2003 08:31:14 Andrew Bollen wrote:
Josh says:

In a fifteen hundred page book?

Without a computer?

No one, as far as I know, is arguing that Gene Wolfe has a perfect memory.

FWIW, I agree with Josh. Roy's list of errors are easily explained as Wolfe nodding, IMO. Go through any series of large books by anybody, and you'll probably find the same. I'm reading Trollope at the moment - a similar effort for his body of work would probably fill a volume the size of one of his big, fat novels.

I wouldn't disagree with you were it not for Severian's persistent claim to a perfect memory.

Is that claim significant or just a throw-away line. Throw-away lines in Wolfe?

If it's significant I don't find it credible that Wolfe would have allowed it to be diminished or negated by a number of textual "mistakes".

So we have a meaningful reference to the narrator's memory; a careful author (who is on record to the effect that he never says anything twice yet the matter of Severian's memory is repeatedly highlighted). And in Severian we have a first person narrator who is not consistent.

And an observed correlation between some of the inconsistencies and claims for Severian's memory.

There has to be a reason for this although I confess that what that reason might be eludes me entirely.

Matthew

Andy Robertson — 14 Jul 2003, 07:45 · follows matthew.malthouse

I personally think it's a backhand statement of the fact that Severian is the Narrator.

Wolfe's universe is a Catholic one, and in a Catholic universe The Narrator has a special place.

A way of putting it would be that S's memory is perfect **because this reality conforms to his memory** not the other way round.

I am sorry if this sounds semi-mystical, but it expresses more or less what I mean. I think.

I am still lurking here with great enjoyment but I only have time to drop in the odd note nowadays, and some of the notes are very odd indeed :-)

hartshorn

----- Original Message -----

From: <matthew.malthouse at guardian.co.uk>
To: <urth at urth.net>
Sent: Monday, July 14, 2003 8:09 AM
Subject: Re: (urth) Sev's not-so-perfect memory
I wouldn't disagree with you were it not for Severian's persistent claim to a perfect memory.

Is that claim significant or just a throw-away line. Throw-away lines in Wolfe?

Adam Stephanides — 14 Jul 2003, 13:25 · follows Andy Robertson

on 7/12/03 11:31 AM, Josh Geller at brunians at brunians.org wrote:
On Sat, 2003-07-12 at 07:25, Adam Stephanides wrote:

What convinces me is the number of discrepancies Roy has found, rather than any specific one. We know that Wolfe is a careful writer; if he were going to create a character who really had a perfect memory, he would surely have cross-checked the character's later recollections of events with the original accounts.

In a fifteen hundred page book?

Without a computer?

No one, as far as I know, is arguing that Gene Wolfe has a perfect memory.

And Wolfe undoubtedly knows he doesn't have a perfect memory. Which is why, if he had intended to create a character with a perfect memory, and to provide many illustrations of this perfection, he wouldn't have relied on his own memory to get it right.

And he must have had an outline, or some other means of locating events in his manuscript. Otherwise he couldn't possibly have written a 1500-page book in which the parts are so complexly related.

--Adam

Thomas Bitterman — 14 Jul 2003, 23:43 · follows Adam Stephanides

Crush responds:

Since they are trivial, they can only be errors in memory (assuming they aren't typos).

They might also be errors in interpretation. Perhaps Drotte and Roche both said it, but at one point it was more significant that one said it, and at another time the other. Maybe Vodalus handed the pistol to Thea with his helper as an intermediary.

After a while it starts

to sound like Biblical exegesis. Which may be the point.

Tom

James Jordan — 15 Jul 2003, 00:09 · follows Thomas Bitterman

At 06:43 PM 7/14/2003, you wrote:

Crush responds:

Since they are trivial, they can only be errors in memory (assuming they aren't typos).

They might also be errors in interpretation. Perhaps Drotte and Roche both said it, but at

one point it was more significant that one said it, and at another time the other. Maybe

Vodalus handed the pistol to Thea with his helper as an intermediary.

After a while it starts

to sound like Biblical exegesis. Which may be the point.

Tom

Yes, this is like interpreting a particular part of the Bible that is kind of relevant to the Severian narrative: the gospels. One can find scores of "contradictions" in the four gospels that upon a brief inspection turn out not to be contradictions. Did Jesus meet two blind men on the road to Jericho (Matthew), or only one (Mark)? Resolution: He met two, but for thematic reasons the legal "two witness" gospel of Matthew mentions two, and the personalistic gospel of Mark only mentions one and names him. Was Jesus leaving Jericho or entering it? Leaving the old Jewish city (Matthew & Mark, more Jewish) and entering the newer Roman city (Luke, more Gentile orientation). The gospels seem to give different accounts of who came to the empty tomb on resurrection morning, but these can easily be put together into a coherent narrative.

Another example of this kind of question consists of the differences between the books of Kings and the books of Chronicles, in the Old Testament.

Of course, some people object to these harmonizings and prefer to believe in real errors or differences between the gospels. Fine. Wolfe, however, is a conservative Catholic, and I've no doubt but he is a harmonizer when it comes to the gospel accounts. And the question on the table is what Wolfe is doing.

Which is why I agree with Tom. Before assuming there are real contradictions in Sev's book, we should consider whether some or even all of them can be harmonized.

I agree that Sev's repeated claims to perfect memory are suspicious, and likely a self-deception. I'm just arguing that we want fully clear-cut examples so we can begin to uncover precisely what Wolfe may be getting at.

Nutria

Chris — 15 Jul 2003, 00:09 · follows James Jordan

To throw more into the fire:

Perhaps, given the "many worlds" cosmology of the NS books, Severian has actually picked up

memories from Severians in several different branches of the possible event tree which all had similar enough outcomes that they succeeded and were able to return, become Autarch, and pass their memories on. If the differences were small enough he might not notice that he was remembering it differently from one time to the next. Even larger differences might pass unnoticed if there were enough time between the first remembrance and whenever he revisits the same subject. It may not be the only or even the best solution, but it's consistent enough and hangs together with the Ash episode.

On a side note, I am not very comfortable attaching the same powers Silk has (seeming to be able to change stories, including his own) to Severian. The two may be connected, but are not the same. Were there hints in the NS novels that Severian was able to do this? I can't recall any.

Civet

Crush responds:

Since they are trivial, they can only be errors in memory (assuming they aren't typos).

They might also be errors in interpretation. Perhaps Drotte and Roche both said it, but at one point it was more significant that one said it, and at another time the other. Maybe Vodalus handed the pistol to Thea with his helper as an intermediary. After a while it starts to sound like Biblical exegesis. Which may be the point.

Tom

--

Roy C. Lackey — 15 Jul 2003, 04:50 · follows Chris

Adam wrote:

(It's been a while

since I last read the books, though; are there any scenes where his great memory is objectively validated?)

Since Sev wrote the whole thing there are, of course, no independent accounts of an event also related by Sev to compare. In fact, I can recall only one scene in which another character made any comment at all about Sev's memory, and that one casts doubts about it. It's in chapter XIII of SHADOW, on the day Sev left for Thrax. Master Palaemon was giving Sev instructions and advice for his journey and Sev (it's almost the trademark of Wolfe's unreliable narrators) wasn't paying attention:

"Severian!" Master Palaemon exclaimed. You are not listening to me. You were never an inattentive pupil in our classes."

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about a great many things."

"No doubt." For the first time he really smiled, and for an instant looked his old self, the Master Palaemon of my boyhood. "Yet I was giving you such good advice for your journey. Now you must do without it, but doubtless you would have forgotten everything anyway."

Now, in one breath Palaemon indicates that Sev had always been attentive in class. Sev is pretty-near grown at this point; his schooling is over with. A child with a very good memory, much less an eidetic one, who paid attention in class couldn't help but be a star pupil. He only

had to be told something once. It's hard to believe that in those small classes Sev's remarkable memory would have gone unnoticed by his teachers. Yet, almost in the next breath, Palaemon doesn't hesitate to say that Sev would doubtless have forgotten everything anyway. That a damn peculiar remark to make to someone who should have been notable for never forgetting _anything_.

-Roy

mournings glory — 15 Jul 2003, 05:28 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Wrote Nutria:

" Wolfe worked over the New Sun books FOUR times before initial publication."

Does anyone know if any of these earlier drafts still exist and/or if Mr. Wolfe has designated a final repository for his works yet? Knowing our luck he's probably destroyed them, but just think what a close analysis of this putative quartet might reveal.

Also, while I'm temporarily delurking, would like to recommend Wolfe's "From the Cradle," in the latest Year's Best Fantasy edited by David Hartwell. It's the tale of another brown book, with three embedded stories a la PEACE, and many of you will surely enjoy it.

msg (enhances only food, not memory)

LJ Janowski — 15 Jul 2003, 14:14 · follows mournings glory

Chris wrote:

From: "Chris"

Subject: Re: (urth) Sev's not-so-perfect memory

Date: Tue, 15 Jul 2003 00:09:06 +0000

To throw more into the fire:

Perhaps, given the "many worlds" cosmology of the NS books, Severian has actually picked up memories from Severians in several different branches of the possible event tree which all had similar enough outcomes that they succeeded and were able to return, become Autarch, and pass their memories on. If the differences were small enough he might not notice that he was remembering it differently from one time to the next. Even larger differences might pass unnoticed if there were enough time between the first remembrance and whenever he revisits the same subject. It may not be the only or even the best solution, but it's consistent enough and hangs together with the Ash episode.

LJ writes:

I tend to side with Chris (and the several others who were pursuing similar arguments), I simply cannot believe that several of the conflicting points would be Wolfe's mistakes. For instance, the "like glass grow"/"like grass grow" dissimilarity between Sev's charm in BOTNS and UOTNS was so striking I caught it while reading the first time through. And given that Wolfe has stressed in several interviews that he finds it shocking when he readers expect narrators *not* to lie, it seems that the tension between Sev's claims to flawless memory and his actual capabilities has to be deliberate. As several excellent posts have pointed out, there are several areas where, even if Sev's memory is near flawless (his narration is highly detailed and he seems too unimaginative to completely fabricate things whole cloth), he becomes muddled and contradicts himself. I like the theory that the contradiction results at least partially from outside

manipulation of Sev's timeline and would argue that another of Severian's claims also supports the idea.

With all the insistence on Sev's claims to perfect memory, the discussion has not touched upon another Sev's insistence that he is at least partially insane. To my mind, Sev's belief in his own insanity reflects his occasional lapses into fugue and the events at the end of BOTSS (too unbelievable for him to write down), but also support the many timelines interpretation (i.e. the ambiguity of Sev's memory sometimes results from accurate memory of events that temporal manipulation has rendered ambiguous). Sev suspects his insanity because his memory, ordinarily powerful, fails him at several critical junctures. The claims of perfect memory and partial insanity allow Sev to have his cake and eat it too. He can rationalize the flaws in his acute memory to himself by using his partial insanity to explain experiences that are muddled in his mind.