

BotNS Interpretation points

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 21 May 2006

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b sharp — 21 May 2006, 03:56

At the risk of being trite I'd like to mention some scenes in BotNS which, I think, are Wolfian guides on how to interpret that book (and surely others of his).

1. In Sword, Severian is climbing down a cliff toward Casdoe's house when he encounters a well preserved tile mosaic on the face of an ancient building. (in excerpts) he notes:

<What the design was those tiles traced I never knew; as I descended the cliff I was too near to see it. As I walked I saw it as an insect may be said to see the face in a portrait over whose surface it creeps. The tiles were of many shapes, thought they fit together so closely, and at first I thought them representations of birds, lizards, fish and suchlike creatures all interlocked in the grip of life. Now I feel that this was not so, that they were instead the shapes of a geometry I failed to comprehend, diagrams so complex that the living forms seemed to appear in them as the forms of actual animals appear from the intricate` geometries of complex molecules. I strove understand what might be depicted there (whether it was writing, or a face, or perhaps a mere decorative design). I could not; and perhaps it was each of those, or none depending on the position from which it was seen and the predisposition the viewer brought to it.>

So should we despair of ever making common sense of BotNS because it is too complex and because every reader's position and predispositions are different? Maybe, but perhaps not. While each reader's viewpoint is different, we all share some things in common. And one thing does remain (fairly) constant, which is the position and predisposition of the AUTHOR which, no matter how masterfully disguised and cloaked, may be possible to discern. Especially if we work together.

Gene offers some hope with these:

2. As Severian stares at the stars in the mountains he says,

"At first the stars all seemed a featureless mass of lights. Soon, of course I began to see that some were brighter than others, and that their colors were by no means uniform. Then, quite unexpectedly, when I had been staring at them for a long time, the shape of a peryton seemed to spring out. In a moment it was gone but soon returned, and with it other shapes, some corresponding to constellations of which I had heard, other that were, I'm afraid, entirely of my own making. An amphisbaena, or snake with a head at either end, was particularly distinct.>

3. As Severian contemplates a painting of a garden with a llanero playing guitar:

"The painting was of that irritating kind which dissolves into mere blobs of color unless it can be >seen as a whole. I took a step backward to get a better perspective of it, then another.....">

So how many steps back must we take to fully grasp BotNS? I think at least two. One, perhaps obviously, to encompass Urth of the New Sun. But another to put Fifth Head of Cerberus into the

picture. I think in interviews Wolfe has disavowed this view or pleaded ignorance. But I agree with those who suspect that the two stories are not only set in the same universe but are intimately linked.

-bsharp