

What symbols mean for Wolfe

The Urth list — 20 messages, 9 voices, 23 Nov 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6309>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Bill Burgess — 23 Nov 2012, 11:28

*In response to the previous thread inquiring into the meaning of the thorn in the claw and what all other symbols, fangs, talons, etc., this might possibly allude to, I thought I'd start a new thread in order to solicit general thoughts, as well as to give my own, as to what symbols mean for Wolfe.

I don't mean this thread to be about any particular symbol(s), but an inquiry into what symbology itself is. Of course we'll have to use individual symbols as examples, but that will be only to elucidate how Wolfe uses symbols in general rather than to inquire into what a specific symbol means.

Forgive me if all I say is well known stuff from this list. I'm brand new to this mailing list and have not read through the archives at all, nor have I read any scholarly works on Wolfe; I've only read the five books comprising the Book of the New Sun.

With that, here are some of my own observations with support from the text of TBotNS

1. Symbols REPRESENT human life.

*

*That is to say, that the story of an individual human beings' life, a particular group of human beings lives, or human life in general, can all be represented, in various ways, by various symbols. This means that a symbol can no more be exhaustively defined than a human being or humanity can be.

In the text, in the very first paragraph, Severian remembers the wisps of river fog threading the spikes in the locked gate like mountain paths and this image is for him a SYMBOL of his exile.

Then after four books, at the very end of TCotA, he tells us that he has carried us, his readers, from

"gate to gate -- from the locked and fog shrouded gate of the necropolis, to the cloud racked gate we call the sky, the gate that shall lead me, as I hope, beyond the nearer stars".

So, from the locked gate of the graveyard to the gate of Hope -- which is as wide open as the sky. Thus Wolfe expresses his Christianity, but I digress; this isn't really my point in citing these passages.

We know that the locked graveyard gate symbolizes Severian's exile from the guild, but we also know, by the way this is expressed, that Severian sees that exile as a symbol of an even larger Exile, the one that will end on the other side of the sky gate.

The story of his life is Exile. But we could go on forever about what this means without ever exhausting its meaning and could probably find something in every chapter/episode of all four of these books which would add to what Exile means. And whatever we'd find, it is all contained in this one symbol: a locked graveyard gate with fog wisping in it. So it is with all symbols.

2. Symbols represent COMMITMENTS that SHAPE human life.

In the first chapter of TSotT, Severian says that symbols invent us rather than we inventing them. Using the example of the soldier who takes an oath and is given a coin to symbolize that oath, he says they are soldiers at that moment, even though they know nothing of the management of arms. The implication being that they spend the rest of their lives learning the meaning of their commitment.

Over and over this happens to Severian. He commits himself to something that moves him, some image or event becomes a symbol for him, and only later does he learn more about why he was moved, and what his commitments mean for his life. He never stops learning as long as the story of his life continues and this story is the unfolding of what his commitments, and the symbols that caused them, mean.

3. The story of a human life is itself a symbol.

In the passage below, Severian says that Thecla is a symbol of undeserved love (Grace) for him, and says that the force of her life as a symbol did not disappear when she died anymore than what his own life story symbolizes will disappear when he closes the book he is writing. So the lives of people are symbols of something that continues to exist even after they are gone. The great question he ponders, is what these symbols mean in and of themselves, apart from their expression in the lives of human beings

"If Thecla had symbolized love of which I felt myself undeserving, as I know now that she did, then did her symbolic force disappear when I locked the door of her cell behind me" That would be like saying that the writing of this book, over which I have labored for so many watches, will vanish in a blur of vermillion when I close it for the last time and dispatch it to the eternal library maintained by the old Ultan. The great question then, that I pondered as I watched the floating island with longing eyes and chafed at my bonds and cursed the hetman in my heart, is that of determining what these symbols mean in and of themselves. We are like children who look at print and see a serpent in the last letter but one, and a sword in the last. *

Daniel Petersen — 23 Nov 2012, 11:49 · in reply to Bill Burgess

Your observation on Commitments that Shape human life contributes fruitfully to a discussion of Wolfe's rendering of 'predestination and freewill' (a major thematic thread of his whole Solar Cycle).

-DOJP

On Fri, Nov 23, 2012 at 11:28 AM, Bill Burgess <whburth at gmail.com> wrote:

*In response to the previous thread inquiring into the meaning of the thorn in the claw and what all other symbols, fangs, talons, etc., this might possibly allude to, I thought I'd start a new thread in order to solicit general thoughts, as well as to give my own, as to what symbols mean for Wolfe.

I don't mean this thread to be about any particular symbol(s), but an

inquiry into what symbology itself is. Of course we'll have to use individual symbols as examples, but that will be only to elucidate how Wolfe uses symbols in general rather than to inquire into what a specific symbol means.

Forgive me if all I say is well known stuff from this list. I'm brand new to this mailing list and have not read through the archives at all, nor have I read any scholarly works on Wolfe; I've only read the five books comprising the Book of the New Sun.

With that, here are some of my own observations with support from the text of TBotNS

1. Symbols REPRESENT human life.

*

*That is to say, that the story of an individual human beings? life, a particular group of human beings lives, or human life in general, can all be represented, in various ways, by various symbols. This means that a symbol can no more be exhaustively defined than a human being or humanity can be.

In the text, in the very first paragraph, Severian remembers the wisps of river fog threading the spikes in the locked gate like mountain paths and this image is for him a SYMBOL of his exile.

Then after four books, at the very end of TCotA, he tells us that he has carried us, his readers, from

"gate to gate -- from the locked and fog shrouded gate of the necropolis, to the cloud racked gate we call the sky, the gate that shall lead me, as I hope, beyond the nearer stars".

So, from the locked gate of the graveyard to the gate of Hope -- which is as wide open as the sky. Thus Wolfe expresses his Christianity, but I digress; this isn't really my point in citing these passages.

We know that the locked graveyard gate symbolizes Severian's exile from the guild, but we also know, by the way this is expressed, that Severian sees that exile as a symbol of an even larger Exile, the one that will end on the other side of the sky gate.

The story of his life is Exile. But we could go on forever about what this means without ever exhausting its meaning and could probably find something in every chapter/episode of all four of these books which would add to what Exile means. And whatever we'd find, it is all contained in this one symbol: a locked graveyard gate with fog wisping in it. So it is with all symbols.

2. Symbols represent COMMITMENTS that SHAPE human life.

In the first chapter of TSotT, Severian says that symbols invent us rather than we inventing them.

Using the example of the soldier who takes an oath and is given a coin to symbolize that oath, he says they are soldiers at that moment, even though they know nothing of the management of arms. The implication being

that they spend the rest of their lives learning the meaning of their commitment.

Over and over this happens to Severian. He commits himself to something that moves him, some image or event becomes a symbol for him, and only later does he learn more about why he was moved, and what his commitments mean for his life. He never stops learning as long as the story of his life continues and this story is the unfolding of what his commitments, and the symbols that caused them, mean.

3. The story of a human life is itself a symbol.

In the passage below, Severian says that Thecla is a symbol of undeserved love (Grace) for him, and says that the force of her life as a symbol did not disappear when she died anymore than what his own life story symbolizes will disappear when he closes the book he is writing. So the lives of people are symbols of something that continues to exist even after they are gone. The great question he ponders, is what these symbols mean in and of themselves, apart from their expression in the lives of human beings

"If Thecla had symbolized love of which I felt myself undeserving, as I know now that she did, then did her symbolic force disappear when I locked the door of her cell behind me" That would be like saying that the writing of this book, over which I have labored for so many watches, will vanish in a blur of vermillion when I close it for the last time and dispatch it to the eternal library maintained by the old Ultan.

The great question then, that I pondered as I watched the floating island with longing eyes and chafed at my bonds and cursed the hetman in my heart, is that of determining what these symbols mean in and of themselves. We are like children who look at print and see a serpent in the last letter but one, and a sword in the last. *

the badger — 23 Nov 2012, 13:43 · in reply to Bill Burgess

This is a worthy topic. You'll probably want to re-read the brief passage in *Shadow* (I think) where Severian talks about the three levels of meaning that are embedded in every event - I'm sure someone here can give the page reference.

On Nov 23, 2012, at 6:28 AM, "Bill Burgess" <whburth at gmail.com> wrote:

I don't mean this thread to be about any particular symbol(s), but an inquiry into what symbology itself is.

Bill Burgess — 25 Nov 2012, 23:07 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

This is interesting. Being new to the list, I haven't read those discussions.

I'd find it a little surprising that anyone would think Severian was not freely making the decisions which lead him on his path. For example, the compassionate decisions which lead to his exile, or decisions every step of the way that could have made his story completely different. He could have sold the claw immediately for a profit for example.

Nor is there anything in the story that would lead us to believe that his choices were all optimal

in what forces outside him had chosen him for.

It seems Severian's identity consists in the choices he makes. His being chosen also consists in the choices he makes in the sense that his being chosen was conditioned by those choices rather than the other way around.

On Fri, Nov 23, 2012 at 3:49 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:
Your observation on Commitments that Shape human life contributes fruitfully to a discussion of Wolfe's rendering of 'predestination and freewill' (a major thematic thread of his whole Solar Cycle).

-DOJP

On Fri, Nov 23, 2012 at 11:28 AM, Bill Burgess <whburth at gmail.com> wrote:

*In response to the previous thread inquiring into the meaning of the thorn in the claw and what all other symbols, fangs, talons, etc., this might possibly allude to, I thought I'd start a new thread in order to solicit general thoughts, as well as to give my own, as to what symbols mean for Wolfe.

I don't mean this thread to be about any particular symbol(s), but an inquiry into what symbology itself is. Of course we'll have to use individual symbols as examples, but that will be only to elucidate how Wolfe uses symbols in general rather than to inquire into what a specific symbol means.

Forgive me if all I say is well known stuff from this list. I'm brand new to this mailing list and have not read through the archives at all, nor have I read any scholarly works on Wolfe; I've only read the five books comprising the Book of the New Sun.

With that, here are some of my own observations with support from the text of TBotNS

1. Symbols REPRESENT human life.

*

*That is to say, that the story of an individual human beings? life, a particular group of human beings lives, or human life in general, can all be represented, in various ways, by various symbols. This means that a symbol can no more be exhaustively defined than a human being or humanity can be.

In the text, in the very first paragraph, Severian remembers the wisps of river fog threading the spikes in the locked gate like mountain paths and this image is for him a SYMBOL of his exile.

Then after four books, at the very end of TCotA, he tells us that he has carried us, his readers, from

"gate to gate -- from the locked and fog shrouded gate of the necropolis, to the cloud racked gate we call the sky, the gate that shall lead me, as I hope, beyond the nearer stars".

So, from the locked gate of the graveyard to the gate of Hope -- which is as wide open as the sky. Thus Wolfe expresses his Christianity, but I digress; this isn't really my point in citing these passages.

We know that the locked graveyard gate symbolizes Severian's exile from the guild, but we also know, by the way this is expressed, that Severian sees that exile as a symbol of an even larger Exile, the one that will end on the other side of the sky gate.

The story of his life is Exile. But we could go on forever about what this means without ever exhausting its meaning and could probably find something in every chapter/episode of all four of these books which would add to what Exile means. And whatever we'd find, it is all contained in this one symbol: a locked graveyard gate with fog wisping in it. So it is with all symbols.

2. Symbols represent COMMITMENTS that SHAPE human life.

In the first chapter of TSotT, Severian says that symbols invent us rather than we inventing them.

Using the example of the soldier who takes an oath and is given a coin to symbolize that oath, he says they are soldiers at that moment, even though they know nothing of the management of arms. The implication being that they spend the rest of their lives learning the meaning of their commitment.

Over and over this happens to Severian. He commits himself to something that moves him, some image or event becomes a symbol for him, and only later does he learn more about why he was moved, and what his commitments mean for his life. He never stops learning as long as the story of his life continues and this story is the unfolding of what his commitments, and the symbols that caused them, mean.

3. The story of a human life is itself a symbol.

In the passage below, Severian says that Thecla is a symbol of undeserved love (Grace) for him, and says that the force of her life as a symbol did not disappear when she died anymore than what his own life story symbolizes will disappear when he closes the book he is writing. So the lives of people are symbols of something that continues to exist even after they are gone. The great question he ponders, is what these symbols mean in and of themselves, apart from their expression in the lives of human beings

"If Thecla had symbolized love of which I felt myself undeserving, as I know now that she did, then did her symbolic force disappear when I locked the door of her cell behind me" That would be like saying that the writing of this book, over which I have labored for so many watches, will vanish in a blur of vermillion when I close it for the last time and dispatch it to the eternal library maintained by the old Ultan.

The great question then, that I pondered as I watched the floating island with longing eyes and chafed at my bonds and cursed the hetman in my heart, is that of determining what these symbols mean in and of themselves. We are like children who look at print and see a serpent in the last letter but one, and a sword in the last. *

Daniel Petersen — 26 Nov 2012, 11:33 · in reply to Bill Burgess

Some passages struck me as flirting with some sort of determinism (even if compatibilist), but I can't recall where offhand. Does anyone see any evidence of *libertarian* freewill in BotNS? I think I agree with Bill's analysis of Severian's choices being central to shaping the turnings of his story, which does look more like libertarian freewill than anything else to me. If the more determinist notions do exist in the text as I recall, then I assume what we have is a wrestling between the two philosophies in the series rather than a clear espousal or embodiment of one over the other.

-DOJP

On Sun, Nov 25, 2012 at 11:07 PM, Bill Burgess <whburth at gmail.com> wrote:
This is interesting. Being new to the list, I haven't read those discussions.

I'd find it a little surprising that anyone would think Severian was not freely making the decisions which lead him on his path. For example, the compassionate decisions which lead to his exile, or decisions every step of the way that could have made his story completely different. He could have sold the claw immediately for a profit for example.

Nor is there anything in the story that would lead us to believe that his choices were all optimal in what forces outside him had chosen him for.

It seems Severian's identity consists in the choices he makes. His being chosen also consists in the choices he makes in the sense that his being chosen was conditioned by those choices rather than the other way around.

On Fri, Nov 23, 2012 at 3:49 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:

Your observation on Commitments that Shape human life contributes fruitfully to a discussion of Wolfe's rendering of 'predestination and freewill' (a major thematic thread of his whole Solar Cycle).

-DOJP

On Fri, Nov 23, 2012 at 11:28 AM, Bill Burgess <whburth at gmail.com> wrote:

*In response to the previous thread inquiring into the meaning of the thorn in the claw and what all other symbols, fangs, talons, etc., this might possibly allude to, I thought I'd start a new thread in order to solicit general thoughts, as well as to give my own, as to what symbols mean for Wolfe.

I don't mean this thread to be about any particular symbol(s), but an inquiry into what symbology itself is. Of course we'll have to use individual symbols as examples, but that will be only to elucidate how Wolfe uses symbols in general rather than to inquire into what a specific symbol means.

Forgive me if all I say is well known stuff from this list. I'm brand new to this mailing list and have not read through the archives at all, nor have I read any scholarly works on Wolfe; I've only read the five books comprising the Book of the New Sun.

With that, here are some of my own observations with support from the

text of TBotNS

1. Symbols REPRESENT human life.

*

*That is to say, that the story of an individual human beings? life, a particular group of human beings lives, or human life in general, can all be represented, in various ways, by various symbols. This means that a symbol can no more be exhaustively defined than a human being or humanity can be.

In the text, in the very first paragraph, Severian remembers the wisps of river fog threading the spikes in the locked gate like mountain paths and this image is for him a SYMBOL of his exile.

Then after four books, at the very end of TCotA, he tells us that he has carried us, his readers, from

“gate to gate -- from the locked and fog shrouded gate of the necropolis, to the cloud racked gate we call the sky, the gate that shall lead me, as I hope, beyond the nearer stars”.

So, from the locked gate of the graveyard to the gate of Hope -- which is as wide open as the sky. Thus Wolfe expresses his Christianity, but I digress; this isn't really my point in citing these passages.

We know that the locked graveyard gate symbolizes Severian's exile from the guild, but we also know, by the way this is expressed, that Severian sees that exile as a symbol of an even larger Exile, the one that will end on the other side of the sky gate.

The story of his life is Exile. But we could go on forever about what this means without ever exhausting its meaning and could probably find something in every chapter/episode of all four of these books which would add to what Exile means. And whatever we'd find, it is all contained in this one symbol: a locked graveyard gate with fog wisping in it. So it is with all symbols.

2. Symbols represent COMMITMENTS that SHAPE human life.

In the first chapter of TSotT, Severian says that symbols invent us rather than we inventing them.

Using the example of the soldier who takes an oath and is given a coin to symbolize that oath, he says they are soldiers at that moment, even though they know nothing of the management of arms. The implication being that they spend the rest of their lives learning the meaning of their commitment.

Over and over this happens to Severian. He commits himself to something that moves him, some image or event becomes a symbol for him, and only later does he learn more about why he was moved, and what his commitments mean for his life. He never stops learning as long as the story of his life continues and this story is the unfolding of what his commitments, and the symbols that caused them, mean.

3. The story of a human life is itself a symbol.

In the passage below, Severian says that Thecla is a symbol of undeserved love (Grace) for him, and says that the force of her life as a symbol did not disappear when she died anymore than what his own life story symbolizes will disappear when he closes the book he is writing. So the lives of people are symbols of something that continues to exist even after they are gone. The great question he ponders, is what these symbols mean in and of themselves, apart from their expression in the lives of human beings

"If Thecla had symbolized love of which I felt myself undeserving, as I know now that she did, then did her symbolic force disappear when I locked the door of her cell behind me" That would be like saying that the writing of this book, over which I have labored for so many watches, will vanish in a blur of vermillion when I close it for the last time and dispatch it to the eternal library maintained by the old Ultan. The great question then, that I pondered as I watched the floating island with longing eyes and chafed at my bonds and cursed the hetman in my heart, is that of determining what these symbols mean in and of themselves. We are like children who look at print and see a serpent in the last letter but one, and a sword in the last. *

David Duffy — 26 Nov 2012, 11:55 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

On Mon, 26 Nov 2012, Daniel Petersen wrote:
Some passages struck me as flirting with some sort of determinism (even if compatibilist), but I can't recall where offhand. Does anyone see any evidence of *libertarian* freewill in BotNS? I think I agree with Bill's analysis of Severian's choices being central to shaping the turnings of his story, which does look more like libertarian freewill than anything else to me. If the more determinist notions do exist in the text as I recall, then I assume what we have is a wrestling between the two philosophies in the series rather than a clear espousal or embodiment of one over the other.

Clearest in his treatment of the chems. That is, you may not necessarily own even your thoughts, but there are still occasions where you get the opportunity to make meaningful decisions, and making the correct one can lead to further expansion of your freedom. And in Soldier of Sidon, if you have arete (are virtuous), you choose to be the best slave that you can be.

David Duffy.

Daniel Petersen — 26 Nov 2012, 13:01 · in reply to David Duffy

Clearest in his treatment of the chems. That is, you may not necessarily own even your thoughts, but there are still occasions where you get the opportunity to make meaningful decisions, and making the correct one can lead to further expansion of your freedom. And in Soldier of Sidon, if you have arete (are virtuous), you choose to be the best slave that you can be.

David Duffy.

In that case, some of the things chems do in Long and Short Suns become even more poignant (e.g. Marble and her fella creating Olivine together).

-DOJP

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 11:55 AM, David Duffy <David.Duffy at qimr.edu.au>wrote:
On Mon, 26 Nov 2012, Daniel Petersen wrote:

Some passages struck me as flirting with some sort of determinism (even if compatibilist), but I can't recall where offhand. Does anyone see any evidence of *libertarian* freewill in BotNS? I think I agree with Bill's analysis of Severian's choices being central to shaping the turnings of his story, which does look more like libertarian freewill than anything else to me. If the more determinist notions do exist in the text as I recall, then I assume what we have is a wrestling between the two philosophies in the series rather than a clear espousal or embodiment of one over the other.

Clearest in his treatment of the chems. That is, you may not necessarily own even your thoughts, but there are still occasions where you get the opportunity to make meaningful decisions, and making the correct one can lead to further expansion of your freedom. And in *Soldier of Sidon*, if you have arete (are virtuous), you choose to be the best slave that you can be.

David Duffy.

_____*_*_____

Lee Berman — 26 Nov 2012, 14:05 · follows Daniel Petersen

Bill Burgess: I'd find it a little surprising that anyone would think Severian was not freely making the decisions which lead him on his path.

I'm thinking Daniel Petersen's comment may have been inspired by Severian's/Wolfe's own line that "We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges."

This would appear to fly in the face of "free will". How can we fully have it if "symbols" can control and define our choices?

I think this adds religious philosophical depth to BotNS. We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would irrevocably lead to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

The quote above is related to Severian's treasuring of the (false) coin he received from Vodalus and his lack of awareness that accepting the coin led to an attachment to Vodalus and the values he fought for, which affected his choice to disobey his guild in regard to Vodalus' follower, Thecla and many other choices after that.

(it does make me wonder what new values Gene Wolfe found himself adopting and what choices he ended up making based on his acceptance of symbols such as a US military uniform and gun)

I wonder if this all relates in some way to the ring Horn chooses to wear in Short Sun. I think we readers are meant to understand it provides a portal for god-like beings to possess him or influence his choices. But for Horn, the ring might seem only to have symbolic meaning. Perhaps a practical example of how symbols might shape us when they represent powerful forces beyond our understanding.

Daniel Petersen — 26 Nov 2012, 14:23 · in reply to Lee Berman

We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would irrevocably lead to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

Well, many theologies don't at all think it follows from a doctrine of God (e.g. omniscience and omnipotence) that every 'micro-choice' of creatures is thereby determined and fixed without reference to the subject making his or her own meaningful and actual choice. As I say, I suspect Wolfe is giving space for these variant theologies to wrestle in the Solar Cycle rather than simply embodying one or the other. (As does Catholic teaching in general, I believe.)

In terms of symbology, the coin, and I'm pretty sure other moments, point fairly strongly in the direction of some kind of theological determinism (compatibilist). The characterisations, as has been suggested, perhaps point in a more theologically libertarian freewill direction. What I'm wondering is whether there are *symbols* in the work that image forth libertarian notions. Anyone?

-DOJP

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 2:05 PM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

Bill Burgess: I'd find it a little surprising that anyone would think Severian was not freely making the decisions which lead him on his path.

I'm thinking Daniel Petersen's comment may have been inspired by Severian's/Wolfe's own line that "We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges."

This would appear to fly in the face of "free will". How can we fully have it if "symbols" can control and define our choices?

I think this adds religious philosophical depth to BotNS. We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would irrevocably lead to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

The quote above is related to Severian's treasuring of the (false) coin he

received from
Vodalus and his lack of awareness that accepting the coin led to an
attachment to Vodalus
and the values he fought for, which affected his choice to disobey his
guild in regard to
Vodalus' follower, Thecla and many other choices after that.

(it does make me wonder what new values Gene Wolfe found himself adopting
and what choices
he ended up making based on his acceptance of symbols such as a US
military uniform and gun)

I wonder if this all relates in some way to the ring Horn chooses to wear
in Short Sun. I think
we readers are meant to understand it provides a portal for god-like
beings to possess him or
influence his choices. But for Horn, the ring might seem only to have
symbolic meaning. Perhaps
a practical example of how symbols might shape us when they represent
powerful forces beyond our
understanding.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 26 Nov 2012, 16:54 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

There's a passage somewhere where Silk wonders whether "free will" is just the privilege of
consenting to what is going to happen anyway.

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 5:01 AM, Daniel Petersen <
danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:
Clearest in his treatment of the chems. That is, you may not necessarily
own even your thoughts, but there are still occasions where you get the
opportunity to make meaningful decisions, and making the correct one can
lead to further expansion of your freedom. And in *_Soldier of Sidon_*, if
you have arete (are virtuous), you choose to be the best slave that you can
be.

David Duffy.

In that case, some of the things chems do in Long and Short Suns become
even more poignant (e.g. Marble and her fella creating Olivine together).

-DOJP

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 11:55 AM, David Duffy <David.Duffy at qimr.edu.au> wrote:

On Mon, 26 Nov 2012, Daniel Petersen wrote:

Some passages struck me as flirting with some sort of determinism (even if
compatibilist), but I can't recall where offhand. Does anyone see any
evidence of **libertarian** freewill in BotNS? I think I agree with Bill's
analysis of Severian's choices being central to shaping the turnings of
his
story, which does look more like libertarian freewill than anything else
to
me. If the more determinist notions do exist in the text as I recall,
then

I assume what we have is a wrestling between the two philosophies in the series rather than a clear espousal or embodiment of one over the other.

Clearest in his treatment of the chems. That is, you may not necessarily own even your thoughts, but there are still occasions where you get the opportunity to make meaningful decisions, and making the correct one can lead to further expansion of your freedom. And in *_Soldier of Sidon_*, if you have arete (are virtuous), you choose to be the best slave that you can be.

David Duffy.

Adam Thornton — 26 Nov 2012, 16:57 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

I think maybe there's a third principle to add to my Two Keys To Wolfe, but I think they're all articulations of the same ur-theme, which I haven't found a nice concise aphorism. I'll put the new one first:

- 1) Symbols are Real
- 2) You Are What You Eat
- 3) You Become What You Imitate

1 and 3 are the same thing in different guises, I think, and 2 is a special case of 3, maybe.

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 8:23 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:
We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would irrevocably lead to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

Well, many theologies don't at all think it follows from a doctrine of God (e.g. omniscience and omnipotence) that every 'micro-choice' of creatures is thereby determined and fixed without reference to the subject making his or her own meaningful and actual choice. As I say, I suspect Wolfe is giving space for these variant theologies to wrestle in the Solar Cycle rather than simply embodying one or the other. (As does Catholic teaching in general, I believe.)

In terms of symbology, the coin, and I'm pretty sure other moments, point fairly strongly in the direction of some kind of theological determinism (compatibilist). The characterisations, as has been suggested, perhaps point in a more theologically libertarian freewill direction. What I'm wondering is whether there are *symbols* in the work that image forth libertarian notions. Anyone?

-DOJP

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 2:05 PM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

Bill Burgess: I'd find it a little surprising that anyone would think Severian was not

freely making the decisions which lead him on his path.

I'm thinking Daniel Petersen's comment may have been inspired by Severian's/Wolfe's own line that "We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges."

This would appear to fly in the face of "free will". How can we fully have it if "symbols" can control and define our choices?

I think this adds religious philosophical depth to BotNS. We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would irrevocably lead to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

The quote above is related to Severian's treasuring of the (false) coin he received from Vodalus and his lack of awareness that accepting the coin led to an attachment to Vodalus and the values he fought for, which affected his choice to disobey his guild in regard to Vodalus' follower, Thecla and many other choices after that.

(it does make me wonder what new values Gene Wolfe found himself adopting and what choices he ended up making based on his acceptance of symbols such as a US military uniform and gun)

I wonder if this all relates in some way to the ring Horn chooses to wear in Short Sun. I think we readers are meant to understand it provides a portal for god-like beings to possess him or influence his choices. But for Horn, the ring might seem only to have symbolic meaning. Perhaps a practical example of how symbols might shape us when they represent powerful forces beyond our understanding.

Gerry Quinn — 26 Nov 2012, 17:43 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

From: Daniel Petersen

Some passages struck me as flirting with some sort of determinism (even if compatibilist), but I can't recall where offhand. Does anyone see any evidence of *libertarian* freewill in BotNS? I think I agree with Bill's analysis of Severian's choices being central to shaping the turnings of his story, which does look more like libertarian freewill than anything else to me. If the more determinist notions do exist in the text as I recall, then I assume what we have is a wrestling between the two

philosophies in the series rather than a clear espousal or embodiment of one over the other.

We have a universe containing time travel with a single 'preferred' history that becomes somehow 'realer' than alternate and still substantially evolved histories such as that of Master Ash, who faded away after saying that he suspected his universe had a lower probability. [It is a similar model to that seen on Star Trek and many other series.] Of course we cannot be certain that Ash was right; Severian still thought he could feel his presence after he faded.

Insofar as there is a preferred history as distinct from a pure multiverse with numerous equally valid histories, time travel necessarily involves some degree of determinism. But one can argue that Wolfe avoids dwelling on this, and of course Christian theology has wrangled over the issue for two millennia without coming to agreement.

A universe with a preferred history has the advantage of being scientifically compatible with some kind of Judeo-Christian deity who can be seen as selecting the best of all possible histories at the end of time, along the lines of Teilhard's Omega Point. I don't know whether Wolfe was thinking along those lines. Dan Simmons explored similar concepts a decade later in the Hyperion series, though in the meantime Frank J. Tipler had written on the subject.

- Gerry Quinn

Lee Berman — 26 Nov 2012, 18:48 · follows Gerry Quinn

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes: There's a passage somewhere where Silk wonders whether "free will" is just the privilege of consenting to what is going to happen anyway.

This is in alignment with my own perspective of things. Truly free and independent choice of action is necessarily a limitation on an all-powerful God's power.

Conversely, the more aware a person becomes of God's Plan the less freedom of action he/she has.

Moreover, a perfect God has no choices at all. There are no forks in the road for God because every choice has a "best" solution and thus God's path is pre-determined, single-track and perfect.

Thus free-will...I won't call it an illusion. But it is something which can exist only from a human perspective, not a divine perspective.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 26 Nov 2012, 18:50 · in reply to Lee Berman

Or to put it differently: Both God and Man are absolutely free to act in accordance with their nature. However, that nature constrains their choices...

Einstein once pondered, "I wonder if God had any choice in making the universe."

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 10:48 AM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com>wrote:

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes: There's a passage somewhere where Silk wonders whether "free will" is just the privilege of consenting to what is going to happen anyway.

This is in alignment with my own perspective of things. Truly free and independent choice of action is necessarily a limitation on an all-powerful God's power.

Conversely, the more aware a person becomes of God's Plan the less freedom of action he/she has.

Moreover, a perfect God has no choices at all. There are no forks in the road for God because every choice has a "best" solution and thus God's path is pre-determined, single-track and perfect.

Thus free-will..I won't call it an illusion. But it is something which can exist only from a human perspective, not a divine perspective.

Daniel Petersen — 26 Nov 2012, 20:28 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

A universe with a preferred history has the advantage of being scientifically compatible with some kind of Judeo-Christian deity who can be seen as selecting the best of all possible histories at the end of time, along the lines of Teilhard's Omega Point. I don't know whether Wolfe was thinking along those lines.

Hm. I still haven't familiarised myself with Teilhard's thought, but what you describe there sounds a bit like what I understand to be the Molinist or Middle Knowledge account of election and freewill. I wonder whether that could 'solve' the time travel element (making it work with some amount of libertarian freedom of choice) and whether Wolfe might *possibly* have had such a thing in mind? (Molina was a Jesuit, so...?)

-DOJP

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 5:43 PM, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:
A universe with a preferred history has the advantage of being scientifically compatible with some kind of Judeo-Christian deity who can be seen as selecting the best of all possible histories at the end of time, along the lines of Teilhard's Omega Point. I don't know whether Wolfe was thinking along those lines.

Daniel Otto Jack Petersen

Daniel Petersen — 26 Nov 2012, 20:58 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Well, fellas, I can't get into it now, but there are PhD theologians out there who see it differently - it's not as cut and dried as you gents are making it sound. Omnipotence and Providence might interact with finite human (libertarian) freedom in very rich ways that are not easy to pin down in an 'if this, then that' or 1,2,3 format.

E.g. since 1) God's all powerful and 2) our choices would limit his power, therefore, 3) we have no real (libertarian) choices - that syllogism can be challenged by, say, better defining premise 1 or rejecting premise 2 as it stands, or even challenging that the conclusion really follows.

But I really should probably stop talking about this issue until I better familiarise myself with relevant passages in the Cycle on freedom and determinism - there's some pretty potent stuff in there as I recall.

-DOJP

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 6:50 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:
Or to put it differently: Both God and Man are absolutely free to act in

accordance with their nature. However, that nature constrains their choices...

Einstein once pondered, "I wonder if God had any choice in making the universe."

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 10:48 AM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com>wrote:

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes: There's a passage somewhere where Silk wonders whether "free will" is just the privilege of consenting to what is going to happen anyway.

This is in alignment with my own perspective of things. Truly free and independent choice of action is necessarily a limitation on an all-powerful God's power.

Conversely, the more aware a person becomes of God's Plan the less freedom of action he/she has.

Moreover, a perfect God has no choices at all. There are no forks in the road for God because every choice has a "best" solution and thus God's path is pre-determined, single-track and perfect.

Thus free-will..I won't call it an illusion. But it is something which can exist only from a human perspective, not a divine perspective.

Bill Burgess — 26 Nov 2012, 21:28 · in reply to Lee Berman

The significance of symbols is nothing more then the human commitments they represent. Symbols shape us because our commitments shape us. Just as a symbol represents knowledge which is not completed even after a lifetime of learning, so our commitments represent the fact that there is more to us then what we know -- and as our lives unfold according to our commitments, so does our knowledge.

Furthermore, just as the commonwealth reconstitutes itself every morning in the shrill tones of it's own clarions, we reconstitute ourselves every morning in our commitments. My wedding ring is only as significant as my commitment, and my commitment must reconstitute itself every morning (or there were times, when I was a younger and better looking man). Even if a commitment is broken, one often has second chances.

See how often Severian breaks what one would assume would be the most dominant commitment in his life; the guild. It seems that few situations could be constructed to have a more determining factor on the commitments an individual makes in life then that of the guild on its apprentices, and yet he breaks his oath repeatedly and vows not to do so again.

Of course, broken commitments can have as much influence on life as kept commitments, and so a symbol retains it's significance either way, but it is a different significance.

Free will is to determinism as up is to down or east is to west, we are determined by what we choose and one could not exist without the other.

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 6:05 AM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com>wrote:

Bill Burgess: I'd find it a little surprising that anyone would think Severian was not freely making the decisions which lead him on his path.

I'm thinking Daniel Petersen's comment may have been inspired by Severian's/Wolfe's own line that "We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges."

This would appear to fly in the face of "free will". How can we fully have it if "symbols" can control and define our choices?

I think this adds religious philosophical depth to BotNS. We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would irrevocably lead to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

The quote above is related to Severian's treasuring of the (false) coin he received from Vodalus and his lack of awareness that accepting the coin led to an attachment to Vodalus and the values he fought for, which affected his choice to disobey his guild in regard to Vodalus' follower, Thecla and many other choices after that.

(it does make me wonder what new values Gene Wolfe found himself adopting and what choices he ended up making based on his acceptance of symbols such as a US military uniform and gun)

I wonder if this all relates in some way to the ring Horn chooses to wear in Short Sun. I think we readers are meant to understand it provides a portal for god-like beings to possess him or influence his choices. But for Horn, the ring might seem only to have symbolic meaning. Perhaps a practical example of how symbols might shape us when they represent powerful forces beyond our understanding.

Bill Burgess — 27 Nov 2012, 01:16 · in reply to Adam Thornton

The medium is the message?

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 8:57 AM, Adam Thornton <athornton at gmail.com> wrote:
I think maybe there's a third principle to add to my Two Keys To Wolfe, but I think they're all articulations of the same ur-theme, which I haven't found a nice concise aphorism. I'll put the new one first:

- 1) Symbols are Real
- 2) You Are What You Eat

3) You Become What You Imitate

1 and 3 are the same thing in different guises, I think, and 2 is a special case of 3, maybe.

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 8:23 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:

We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would irrevocably lead to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

Well, many theologies don't at all think it follows from a doctrine of God (e.g. omniscience and omnipotence) that every 'micro-choice' of creatures is thereby determined and fixed without reference to the subject making his or her own meaningful and actual choice. As I say, I suspect Wolfe is giving space for these variant theologies to wrestle in the Solar Cycle rather than simply embodying one or the other. (As does Catholic teaching in general, I believe.)

In terms of symbology, the coin, and I'm pretty sure other moments, point fairly strongly in the direction of some kind of theological determinism (compatibilist). The characterisations, as has been suggested, perhaps point in a more theologically libertarian freewill direction. What I'm wondering is whether there are *symbols* in the work that image forth libertarian notions. Anyone?

-DOJP

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 2:05 PM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

Bill Burgess: I'd find it a little surprising that anyone would think Severian was not freely making the decisions which lead him on his path.

I'm thinking Daniel Petersen's comment may have been inspired by Severian's/Wolfe's own line that "We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges."

This would appear to fly in the face of "free will". How can we fully have it if "symbols" can control and define our choices?

I think this adds religious philosophical depth to BotNS. We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would

irrevocably lead
to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

The quote above is related to Severian's treasuring of the (false) coin
he received from
Vodalus and his lack of awareness that accepting the coin led to an
attachment to Vodalus
and the values he fought for, which affected his choice to disobey his
guild in regard to
Vodalus' follower, Thecla and many other choices after that.

(it does make me wonder what new values Gene Wolfe found himself
adopting and what choices
he ended up making based on his acceptance of symbols such as a US
military uniform and gun)

I wonder if this all relates in some way to the ring Horn chooses to
wear in Short Sun. I think
we readers are meant to understand it provides a portal for god-like
beings to possess him or
influence his choices. But for Horn, the ring might seem only to have
symbolic meaning. Perhaps
a practical example of how symbols might shape us when they represent
powerful forces beyond our
understanding.

Ryan Dunn — 27 Nov 2012, 02:07 · in reply to Bill Burgess

See, I always took the "symbols invented us" line to do more with basic human instincts (ie. faith, love, sin, greed, the vices and virtues, etc.).

Take the token given to a soldier symbolizing their initiation into an army for instance. Is the coin not just a symbol of war? And isn't war/fighting something we as humans are born with? And even after birth, aren't we conditioned by these human tendencies?

I think the word "symbol" becomes easier to reconcile in this context when it is clear what the symbol in fact symbolizes in the first place. Then we simply have to accept the fact that humans did not invent those source things (god, hate, love, war, sex, etc.). Those things are what make us human.

...ryan

Sent from my iPhone

On Nov 26, 2012, at 8:16 PM, Bill Burgess <whburth at gmail.com> wrote:
The medium is the message?

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 8:57 AM, Adam Thornton <athornton at gmail.com> wrote:

I think maybe there's a third principle to add to my Two Keys To Wolfe, but I think they're all articulations of the same ur-theme, which I haven't found a nice concise aphorism. I'll put the new one first:

- 1) Symbols are Real
- 2) You Are What You Eat
- 3) You Become What You Imitate

1 and 3 are the same thing in different guises, I think, and 2 is a special case of 3, maybe.

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 8:23 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:

We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would irrevocably lead to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

Well, many theologies don't at all think it follows from a doctrine of God (e.g. omniscience and omnipotence) that every 'micro-choice' of creatures is thereby determined and fixed without reference to the subject making his or her own meaningful and actual choice. As I say, I suspect Wolfe is giving space for these variant theologies to wrestle in the Solar Cycle rather than simply embodying one or the other. (As does Catholic teaching in general, I believe.)

In terms of symbology, the coin, and I'm pretty sure other moments, point fairly strongly in the direction of some kind of theological determinism (compatibilist). The characterisations, as has been suggested, perhaps point in a more theologically libertarian freewill direction. What I'm wondering is whether there are symbols in the work that image forth libertarian notions. Anyone?

-DOJP

On Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 2:05 PM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

Bill Burgess: I'd find it a little surprising that anyone would think Severian was not freely making the decisions which lead him on his path.

I'm thinking Daniel Petersen's comment may have been inspired by Severian's/Wolfe's own line that "We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges."

This would appear to fly in the face of "free will". How can we fully have it if "symbols" can control and define our choices?

I think this adds religious philosophical depth to BotNS. We need the illusion(?) of free will to function as a human being on a day by day basis. But the devoutly religious must somehow reconcile this with the irrational awareness that we are the creation of an omniscient and omnipotent God who created the universe knowing it would irrevocably lead to every single micro-choice we end up making in life.

The quote above is related to Severian's treasuring of the (false) coin he received from Vodalus and his lack of awareness that accepting the coin led to an attachment to Vodalus and the values he fought for, which affected his choice to disobey his guild in regard to Vodalus' follower, Thecla and many other choices after that.

(it does make me wonder what new values Gene Wolfe found himself adopting and what choices he ended up making based on his acceptance of symbols such as a US military uniform and gun)

I wonder if this all relates in some way to the ring Horn chooses to wear in Short Sun. I think we readers are meant to understand it provides a portal for god-like beings to possess him or influence his choices. But for Horn, the ring might seem only to have symbolic meaning. Perhaps a practical example of how symbols might shape us when they represent powerful forces beyond our understanding.

Lee Berman — 27 Nov 2012, 14:42 · follows Ryan Dunn

Ryan Dunn: I think the word "symbol" becomes easier to reconcile in this context when it is clear what the symbol in fact symbolizes in the first place. Then we

simply have to accept the fact that humans did not invent those source things (god, hate, love, war, sex, etc.). Those things are what make us human.

I can concur with this view. But what DID invent those source things if not humans? Evolution? God? Are these words for the same thing (in Wolfe's view)?