

TBOTNS in TBOTNS

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 15 Jun 1998

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adam louis stephanides — 15 Jun 1998, 21:14

A while ago there was a discussion here taking off from Wolfe's revelation in Plan[e]t Engineering that one of the books Severian and Thecla read in the cell was The Book of the New Sun, and asking what the relationship was between that book and the book we readers hold in our hands. Having just read all five books, I believe I can say that the book Severian and Thecla read, Canog's BotNS, is not our BotNS or a version thereof. In fact, Canog's book probably is not a biography of Severian at all, although it may have contained what little Canog knew of the "Conciliator's" biography. Hence the issue of "why didn't Severian know what was going to happen to him?" doesn't arise. If you like, the relation between our book and Canog's book is like that between the Gospels in the New Testament and the Gospel of Thomas found at Nag Hammadi, which is purely a collection of Jesus' sayings with no biographical element at all (by which I don't mean to imply that Severian is Christ).

Why do I say this? First of all, we know what Severian tells Herena and Declan in his cell, which Canog takes notes of. "I told them all I knew of the history of the Old Sun's dying, and what that would do to Urth, and I promised them that at last someone would bring a New Sun....Declan wished to know how Urth would fare when the New Sun came; and I, understanding little more than he did himself, drew upon Dr. Talos's play" (V, ch. 37). Severian doesn't say anything about narrating his life story; in fact, when Herena asks him if he's the New Sun he says he "would not speak of that."

This isn't conclusive; as is shown elsewhere in (our) BotNS, the fact that Severian fails to narrate something doesn't prove that it didn't happen. But there's another piece of evidence. When Severian is delivering the books to Thecla, he lists them as "the smallest," "the brown book," "the green book," and "the folio volume with arms on its cover." (I, ch. 7) The brown book is the Book of the Wonders of Urth and Sky, of course. The green book is described as "a collection of devotions, full of enameled pictures of ascetic pantocrators and hypostases..." (I, ch. 6) The "folio volume" is later described as a "book of heraldry" (I, ch. 13). This leaves, by elimination, "the smallest" as Canog's BotNS. But the green book is "hardly larger than my hand and no thicker than my index finger." (I, ch. 6) I submit that a book smaller than that could not be our BotNS. Furthermore, the smallest book is later described as a "book of theology" (I, ch. 13), not a description which fits our BotNS.

(It occurs to me while writing this that I'm not at all clear what are the clues, aside from Wolfe's own statement, from which we're supposed to deduce that Canog's BotNS is among the four books. I've shown that if it's any of them, it must be the smallest; but the only specific information I've found on the contents of this book is that it discusses "those things those who have returned are said to say lie beyond death...not only the accepted views of the hierophants, but various eccentric and heretic theories," a description which has little relation to what we know of Canog's BotNS, or ours. Presumably this was stuff added to Severian's original discourse either by Canog or whatever intermediaries may have come between Canog and the book as Severian and Thecla read it.)

As for the question, which was raised in the earlier discussion, of why Thecla would ask for a book which is lost, I have a theory about that. It's basically off the top of my head, so there may very well be a fact I've forgotten which shoots it down, but here goes.

The book isn't lost, and Thecla knows it isn't lost. The common people, including Dr. Talos, have been led to think it lost. My admittedly speculative reasoning: the New Sun is a sort of a state religion in the Commonwealth, since it presents a future Autarch as the savior of the world. But the BotNS contains the inconvenient information that this "savior" will in fact wipe out nearly all of Urth's population, so the State hides this information by pretending that the book has been lost. The exultants' attitude towards the New Sun is that it's a fairy tale to keep the masses quiet (e. g. Thecla's irreverence), so there's no harm in letting them read the book. One problem with this theory is that the exultants, who are notoriously disloyal, could use their knowledge of the BotNS to turn the populace against the Autarch. But this could be gotten around by assuming that even the rebellious exultants believe in keeping the common people ignorant on general principles.

Finally, while writing this post I noticed a paradox I had never noticed before. Dr. Talos's play is based on Canog's BotNS, which is based on Severian's discussion of the effects of the New Sun in his cell, which is based, as he himself admits, on little more than Dr. Talos's play! So how did the play prove so accurate, not to mention prophetic? Even if we assume that Severian's talk was much more biographical than he admits, he hadn't experienced the scene with Valeria, Baldanders and the prophetess yet; but this scene is predicted by the play. Either Severian is an uncannily accurate unconscious prophet (unlikely since he's so poor as a conscious one) or, more likely, either Canog or Dr. Talos had access to other esoteric sources of knowledge.

--Adam