

Severian's lacunae

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 21 Jun 1998

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adam louis stephanides — 21 Jun 1998, 13:46

There were some very interesting responses on the subject of Severian's reticence, as I called it. I like Peter Stephenson's interpretation of this as Severian pigeonholing people, especially women, and wanting them to behave according to the categories he's put them into. This might connect to his habit of dropping wise-sounding little apothegms into his narrative (which often contradict each other, especially on the subject of love and desire).

I can't go along with the idea that the examples I gave were just a stylistic choice. In some cases, Severian's delayed revelations can be explained in this way (e. g. the end of his encounter with Cyriaca; perhaps the delayed revelation that in the opening fight in the necropolis Severian killed a man). But the examples I gave violate the norms of narration too severely to be just a stylistic variation. In the case of the Severian-Thecla relationship, all but the most suspicious reader will go quite a long time believing that Severian's original portrayal of the relationship was accurate (the first unambiguous indication that they were lovers I found was in Claw, ch. 8). For the examples I gave regarding Dorcas (the Dorcas-Jolenta relationship and Severian's jealousy thereof; Dorcas's remark about the Erinyes) it's even worse: Severian gives us enough information to show that his original portrayal was misleading, but not enough to let us know what the actual situation was.

I also disagree with Neal Smith's explanation that Severian only includes details when they're relevant to the actions of himself or others. Severian includes a lot of details that are not relevant in that sense; as Peter Wright has pointed out, he's a very digressive narrator. And he discusses his emotions at times even when they don't affect his actions: e.g. at the start of Shadow, ch. 13. And of course, his making love to Thecla is an action, and one that's very important to his story.

Finally, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes's theory that because Severian has a perfect memory he sometimes gets so absorbed in the past that he simply forgets he hasn't already told us important information doesn't convince me, although I'm not clear as to how his perfect memory works, if in fact it exists. Besides, it's hard to see how as he relives his life he could simply "forget" to recount such an important event as his first sexual encounter with Thecla.

Still, I don't think that the final word on Severian's lacunae has been uttered. As I suggested in a previous post, my current feeling is that a closer analysis of Severian's narrative technique would be extremely helpful in understanding BotNS.

--Adam