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The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 27 Jun 1998

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Alice Turner — 27 Jun 1998, 18:48

James,

Thanks for the responses so far, although I'd still like some information on the homunculus.

As for my not 'getting' the Little Severian sequence: I originally read parts of tBotNS when I was far too young to understand it properly. I did, however, remember how Little Severian died.

This sequence is, IMO, one of the simplest uses of shock in tBotNS, not following the usual methods of foreshadowing or retrospective inevitability.

Little Severian's death seems to be unusually timed, part-way between leaving him a bit-player and expanding him to a secondary character. So, when I reread this knowing when he would die, it fell flat.

Thanks for bringing this up again because I have a little theory about this that I forgot to post last time. We've often discussed the "other" Severians and how many there are of them (his seeming deaths and resurrections, Apu-Punchau etc.) Well, it seems to me that Li'l Sev is a kind of spare, a just-in-case. If Sev had touched that ring first, the child would have somehow grown up to be him. Baldanders, too, has a "spare," whom we meet only for an instant (it seems to me far more likely that the giant baby is a "spare" than a catamite, though he could be both).

As for the homunculus, he seems to me to be a tribute. First to Goethe, who has a memorable homunculus in a bottle (he escapes) in "Faust Part II." Second, to Eliot, who heads "The Waste Land" with a Latin quote that, translated, reads, "Yes, I myself saw at Cumis the sybil hanging in a cage, and when the boys cried at her, 'Sybil, sybil, what do you want?' she responded, 'I would that I were dead.'"

This comes from Ovid. I looked it up once for mantis, but was too dumb to scribble the citation into my Eliot (mantis, are you there, can you help?) and I don't have time to do it again now, besides my Ovid seems to be misshelved. But the story is the old one of the mortal who asks for immortality and forgets to ask for eternal youth. Eliot being another of those pesky converted Catholics, it probably has several meanings for him---he's at least as tricky as Wolfe.

Note a nice link, therefore, between the Cumaeen--the sybil who leads Virgil into the underworld, as Virgil will lead Dante--and the homunculus. I have another theory that our Cumaeen may turn out to be an inhumus! But I'm sort of kidding there. (Not entirely.)

-alga-