The Bridge of Lost Desire Short Guide

The Bridge of Lost Desire by Samuel R. Delany

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Characters

usual in the Neveryon series, AsGorgik the Liberator engages most of the reader's interest. He, like other legendary figures in Neveryon, is surrounded by layers of conflicting stories about his deeds and his motivations. The first of the three stories in the volume, "The Game of Time and Pain," comes last chronologically of all the Neveryon stories. In this virtually actionless story, Gorgik is on his way to join Lord Krodar's funeral cortege.

Spending the night in an almost deserted castle with a young barbarian, Udrog, Gorgik looks back over his youth and relates a sadistic incident that he witnessed during his days as a mine slave. Later, he tells Udrog of several key events in his campaign to free the slaves. In the final third of the story, he meets the Vizerine Myrgot, his first important protector, and reminisces with her. Thus, throughout "The Game of Time and Pain," the Gorgik presented to the reader is the Gorgik of long ago, filtered through years of sentiment and delusive memory — and filtered, too, by the demands of storytelling for a bored audience of one. The Gorgik of the last story, "The Tale of Gorgik," is defined by his social status and, later, by his success as a mercenary. This story, which comes first chronologically, concerns his early days at court and his first military commission. Significantly, it ends with the words "a civilized man." This is the purely external view of Gorgik, a complement to the monologue of the first story.

The book's other important character, Clodon, is the protagonist of the middle section of the book. The events of this story, "The Tale of Rumor and Desire," also span many years; Clodon appears first at sixteen, then at roughly ten-year intervals. By the time Clodon reaches middle age, Gorgik, famous throughout Neveryon, has nearly completed his mission to free the slaves. It is paradoxical, therefore, that some of Clodon's most vivid memories involve slave collars and sexual domination. In Clodon's section of the book the reader sees Gorgik only from a distance, as most of the populace would.

Social Concerns/Themes

Power and sex, and the interconnections between them, motivate the char acters throughout the Neveryon series.

On one occasion Delany, questioned about this emphasis on power, began his reply with "All four of my grandparents were children of at least one parent born in slavery." A primitive and usually personal kind of exploitation, both economic and sexual, is the norm in the society which Delany depicts. The metal collars once worn by slaves in Neveryon serve not only as emblems of their servitude but also as sexual stimulants for many of the "free" characters; homosexuality and sadomasochism seem to be the preferred relationships, or at least the most common ones.

During the lifetime of Gorgik, the main character in the series, slavery has been abolished in Neveryon. Although Gorgik "the Liberator" is the immediate agent of this change, the society has clearly been ready for it.

During the same period, Neveryon moves toward a less tribal system of government and adopts an alphabet.

Urban values develop that are distinct from rural ones; for instance, felons are flogged in the country but not in the city. Dragons, once common, are found only in one remote area and are evidently on the verge of extinction. Thus the overall title for the entire series, "Return to Neveryon," is itself ironic; the Neveryon of memory has changed within a single lifetime, and the nostalgic satisfaction one expects from a typical sword-and-sorcery tale is quite deliberately undercut.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Like the rest of the Neveryon series, The Bridge of Lost Desire has all the trappings of a standard sword-andsorcery story. That this is not really a sword-and-sorcery tale becomes evident very quickly — as in the earlier volumes. To begin with, the stories are not in chronological order; the first one, "The Game of Time and Pain," actually occurs last while the last one, "The Tale of Gorgik," comes first. (In fact "The Tale of Gorgik" was published in 1979 in a shorter version.

Delany's habit of rewriting his works after they have already appeared in print marks yet another assault on the idea of the conventional text.)

Not only is the relationship among the individual tales complex, but Delany constantly forces metafictional problems upon the reader. Each tale is preceded by a lengthy epigraph: one from a critical work on Lacan, one from Rudolph Gasche, and one from Edward Said. Having read not one but two epigraphs on mirrors, one is compelled to interpret with some care an important scene in which Clodon, wearing a borrowed slave collar, sees himself in a mirror for the first time in his life. As if that were not enough, Delany also provides an appendix by "the irrepressible K. Leslie Steiner," as he calls her in a prefatory note. Steiner observes slyly, "Re-readers may be curious why I, who am after all only a fictive character in some of the pieces to come, have taken this preface on," and quotes Delany's description of the whole series as "a child's garden of semiotics."

Throughout the text, an element of self-conscious narrative intrudes. "The Tale of Rumor and Desire" begins with three fragmentary images numbered 0.1, 0.2, and 0.3. "The Game of Time and Pain" has interpolations such as "We pause before this tale within a tale within a tale — to insert another tale."

Many incidents in all three tales read almost like texts to exemplify certain critical approaches, and "K. Leslie Steiner" points this out to any reader witless enough to miss, for instance, the relevance of Popper on Plato, the adaptations of Freudian theory, and the forays into Marxist interpretation of the narrative voice. (Although, of course, "Steiner" as a fictive character is also subject to textual interpretation.) Perhaps the recurring theme of punishment as a tool of social power owes something to Michel Foucault; perhaps Clodon's foot fetish pays ironic homage to Georges Bataille's provocative essay, "The Big Toe." Certainly — and here virtually all serious readers of Delany are in agreement — the influence of Jacques Derrida, the major deconstructionist theorist, pervades the series, reinforcing the idea that the text can never be reduced to a single, finite, determinate meaning.

But knowledge of literary theory is not necessary to read the series, however much the pleasure of such recognitions may add. In this respect, the narrative most resembles some of the classics of the nonmimetic or fantastic tradition, rather than other sword-andsorcery or science fiction. The works of Borges, for instance, contain the same questioning of reality, the same serious quality of the play of a powerful mind over the

possibilities of narrative. The closest parallel among familiar works in English might well be Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass (1872), which, in addition to its symbolic use of the mirror, contains many narrative discontinuities, problems in logic, and an obsession with naming.

Related Titles

The Bridge of Lost Desire is part of the Neverijon series that includes Tales of Neveryon (1979), Neveryona (1983), and Flight from Neveryon (1985).

The Bridge of Lost Desire connects closely with the rest of the Neveryon series and fills in gaps left in the earlier narratives. Gorgik, Myrgot, and the city of Kolhari, where the bridge of the title is located, are already familiar. So are the patterns of slavery, sexual exploitation, raw power, and Byzantine court intrigues found in Neveryon.

What is stressed more strongly in this book, however, is the emphasis on return and reinterpretation. The appendix by "Steiner" cites a passage in Delany's Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand, about home as a place that can never, by definition, be visited for the first time; this suggests that the swordand-sorcery series about Neveryon and the "diptych" of which Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand is the first part are in fact complementary.

More significant than character or even theme, though, is form. The storywith-fictive-appendix form begins with Triton (1976), and continues through the four books of the Neveryon series.

Delany's recent critical writings and interviews indicate his continuing interest in form.

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