# Roger Zelazny's *Creatures of Light and Darkness*: Exploring the Binary of the Body

Amir Saffar Perez

Abstract

An experimental text, *Creatures of Light and Darkness* is Zelazny's attempt at combining Egyptian myth with cosmic science fiction, presenting the conflict of the gods on a multi-world scale. While liberties are taken with some of the gods and their relationships, Zelazny uses homages to the classical myth, such as the protagonist Wakim being dismembered limb from limb in a manner similar to Osiris, and the conflict between Horus and Set mirroring the various contests between the two gods in Egyptian sources. This essay explores Egyptian mythological references with particular emphasis on the text's fixation on life, death and immortality.

Keywords

Roger Zelazny; mythology; science fiction; Osiris; Horus; Set; immortality; binary code; technology.

In her essay "Science Fiction and Myth Creation in Our Age" (1972), Tatiana Chernyshova describes modern science fiction as less an instigator of new ideas and concepts but instead a form that "elaborates, deepens, and psychologizes already existing 'mythological' themes and situations".[1] Gwyneth Jones goes a step further, suggesting that "science fiction's alien societies are always situated in a frozen past of their real world counterparts", and that, in many ways, these societies become the caretakers of our myths and lost traditions.[2] This characterization suggests that although the degree to which archaic mythology is blended with imagined technology necessarily varies, science fiction writers are the new mythmakers, integrating narrative elements that stretch back to antiquity with dreams of the future.

Science fiction creates new worlds rooted in narrative familiarity but often veiled in a futuristic aesthetic, put to use as a tool to interrogate and explain the world around us. These new worlds often pose questions about the body and its ability to engage with the world. The soul and the flesh are often concepts at odds in science fiction, with the boundary between these binary states of being

1 Chernyshova, "Science Fiction and Myth Creation in Our Age", 356.
2 Jones, "Metempsychosis of the Machine", 7.

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(embodied and disembodied) often blurred and even erased. Considering that religion often poses similar questions about the body and soul, myth and science occupy similar spaces in this case. Combining science fiction's interest in the body with mythology and its theories as to the nature of life allows us to examine ancient ideas of the body and how they can be reinterpreted by technology.

In particular, the point at which a body ceases to be alive is a constant conflict in myriad post-human fiction. Roger Zelazny, to take one example, approaches the body as something to be manipulated and deformed and, in his novel *Creatures of Light and Darkness* (1969), ties such body modification to ancient Egyptian tradition and its care and love of the divine body. Zelazny presents his readers with bodies caught up in the conflict between life and death, as they reach for a semblance of permanence or infinity. In this essay I explain how Zelazny's use of Egyptian myth allows for an exploration of the transformative nature of the body in science fiction. I demonstrate that the Egyptian gods' ambiguity in their myths allow for Zelazny to twist and modify their representations while still staying true to their origins. I also examine how time is used as a vehicle by which the body is transformed. Ultimately, I argue that Zelazny presents life and death as a binary construct, by which identity is both lost and regained by his versions of the Egyptian gods.

## Zelazny and 01000101 01100111 01111001 01110000 01110100

In *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, Zelazny makes extensive use of Egyptian myth in order to portray a universe in which life and death are in a constant state of flux, and the bodies of its citizens in perpetual peril. The story concerns a shadow war between Anubis and Osiris for influence and control, as they both seek the death of their nemesis, Thoth. To that end, both employ champions; Osiris sends his son Horus, while Anubis relies on a man named Wakim, who is later revealed to be the destroyer Set, in addition to being both Thoth's father and son. The story thus revolves around the various interpersonal conflicts between the gods, as well as an otherworldly monster simply referred to as the Thing That Cries In The Night. While Zelazny's main focus is ancient Egyptian religion, he also dips his toe multiple times into Greek myth, with Typhon introduced as a brother to his Egyptian counterpart, Set. Zelazny unifies this mythological mishmash by using binary code, implying that all life boils down to the interaction of zero and one, and each number's approach toward infinity, something to which all mythologies with afterlives can connect. In mathematics, to divide anything by zero results

in infinity. One, and by extension all natural numbers, can culminate in infinity when multiplied constantly, as in Galileo's paradox. This idea that zero and one can both reach infinity is itself paradoxical as one involves dividing (that is, reducing) and the other multiplying (increasing). While infinity cannot be directly perceived, its theoretical existence is often the focus of science fiction, fantasy and academic research.[3]

What makes Egyptian myth so useful in conceiving of a universe in which life and death are both fluid and infinite is its version of the afterlife and the care of the dead. Mummification is one of the best-known funeral rites of the ancient world, and its connection with the gods—specifically Osiris and Anubis—lends itself well to discussions of the preservation and modification of the body. Anubis being the god of mummification and Osiris having been killed and revived (in addition to being the god of the underworld) means that both gods are in constant contact with bodies, living and dead. Compounding this is the duality of the majority of the ancient Egyptian gods, who rarely exist as a singular deity; nearly all of the gods have different pairings. These pairings comprise a male deity and his female counterpart, the best known being the siblings and spouses Osiris and Isis, although interpretations of their myth occasionally present Isis as a romantic partner of her son Horus.[4] Such an example highlights the ambiguity of the relationships between the gods, as multiple variations of the same myth can muddy the waters for modern interpreters. These variations are ofttimes regional, meaning that Egyptian myth is fluid and multivocal, and allowing literary interpretations based on stories of the gods to be somewhat looser. Thematic pairings also extend to the narrative beats of many ancient Egyptian stories,[5] such as the famous "The Contendings of Horus and Seth", which portrays Horus and Set's competitions for supremacy. These pairs, their repetitions, and their relationship with the body, are at the very heart of Zelazny's work.

Zelazny illuminates the binary relationship between life and death early in the text, as Anubis explains to his servant Wakim (actually an amnesiac Set) how the universe is kept in check by him and Osiris:

> Osiris and I are bookkeepers. We credit and we debit. We raise waves, or we cause waves to sink back again into the ocean. Can

3 Sergeyev, "Some Paradoxes of Infinity Revisited".
4 Pinch, *Egyptian Myth*, 39.
5 "There are two main kinds of paired mythemes, which could be labelled symmetrical and non-symmetrical. When reduced to essentials, symmetrical pairs are identical events with different protagonists"; Pinch, *Egyptian Myth*, 93.

> life be counted upon to limit itself? No. It is the mindless striving of two to become infinity. Can death be counted upon to limit itself? Never. It is the equally mindless effort of zero to encompass infinity.[6]

This dual nature of life and death's pursuit of a form of eternity is juxtaposed through the gods' immortality and their refusal to cede control and life to the universe. Immortality is presented by the gods as something unnatural that needs to be removed for universal betterment. But this is revealed to be a lie: Anubis and Osiris fear the pursuit of immortality by the non-divine, as it weakens their tenuous position as the rulers of life and death. Immortality is revealed to be more common than one might expect, with exactly 239 immortals populating the novel's universe. Immortality is a repeated trope in Zelazny's fiction. His *Amber* series, to take another example, revolves around shadow wars between immortal princes and princesses that influence the lives of billions. In both cases—the conflict of Anubis and Osiris and that of Amber and Chaos—we have forces on opposing axes of the universe doing battle in the "lesser" worlds between them. Immortal beings in Zelazny's novels often serve as heroes, whose vast ages allow them to move back and forth between high poetry and modern slang in the same sentence. From Conrad in *This Immortal* (1965) to Corwin in *Amber*, immortals rule, and *Creatures of Light and Darkness* is no different. What makes Zelazny's immortals different from others is how they are still able be impacted by time, despite their immortality. As noted by Jane Lindskold, one common pitfall when writing immortal characters is that there is little sense of how they perceive time and as a result their immortality feels superficial.[7] Zelazny's immortals in *Creatures of Light and Darkness* often have unique and contradictory relationships with both time and space, which often go hand in hand with their ability to comprehend some semblance of infinity.

*Creatures of Light and Darkness* (henceforth, "*Creatures*") is an unusual text. While its predecessor, *Lord of Light* (1967), also grappled with the fusion of technological ascension with traditional mythological plots, it did so in the form of a novel. *Creatures* instead mixes multiple textual forms such as poetry and playscript to emphasize the strange otherness of its characters. Their immortality and extreme power make their thoughts and motivations difficult to express in human terms, and *Creatures* renders this through its discordant multitude of com-

6 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 10.
7 Lindskold, "What to Do With Immortality".

peting narrative forms. This is the result of the novel being originally intended for Zelazny's amusement, an experiment not meant for publication. It was only after Chip Delany mentioned it to an editor that the book would eventually see the light of day, to the combined delight and confusion of those who read it.[8]

*Creatures*' oddness is also in part due to its parodying of the New Wave movement, a science fiction subgenre in which Zelazny was considered one of the leading authors.[9] The New Wave was seen as a rejection of pulp style science fiction, in favor of seemingly more cerebral and complex narratives. The stories were introspective instead of being predominantly adventure tales. Zelazny distanced himself from the term "New Wave", however, deeming it "just a popular tag slapped on a number of writers", and *Creatures* seems to be a satirical take on the movement.[10] This parody still retains power, as its shifting of different styles also embodies the distinct representations of the gods, as in oral and written traditions. The parody lies in the use of introspectiveness and psychedelic storytelling to create a pulpish style of story, which still speaks to complex ideas of love and life. Brett Cox argues that the parody nonetheless embraces New Wave principles, observing that "*Creatures* [...] marks a more radical departure from conventional narrative than does *Lord of Light* and Zelazny's most wholehearted embrace of the techniques of literary modernism", leading to the text's structure sharing in the narrative's duality and ambiguity.[11] But while the text does delve into parodic ideas, its scientific elements still convey a sense of grandeur and scale, and the mix of scientific concepts drawn from the recent identification of black holes and theories of time travel allow for the story to be taken seriously: while the gods are often portrayed as silly entities, the cruelty they inflict is not to be sneered at.

## Life, Death and the Bodies in Between

The story of *Creatures* is put into motion by Anubis and Osiris, who run the House of the Dead and House of Life respectively. Osiris represents life eternal, being able to make creatures immortal through science and magic. Anubis, meanwhile, is the lord of mummification, performing his services on various characters. Both deities are antagonistic forces, manipulating other gods in an attempt to usurp the other. Anubis uses a champion named Wakim (who is actually the god Set) in a

8 Cox, *Roger Zelazny*, 68.
9 Cox, *Roger Zelazny*, 72.
10 Cox, *Roger Zelazny*, 40.
11 Cox, *Roger Zelazny*, 68.

bid to kill Thoth and secure his throne, while Osiris uses his son Horus for the same end.

Wakim is our initial protagonist, though the text's focalization becomes increasingly fluid, predominantly shifting between Wakim, Horus and Thoth. Wakim is introduced in a peculiar fashion at the narrative's opening, with Zelazny emphasizing his unaltered body, as the amnesiac Set has not yet been named Wakim:

> For this dark time, we'll simply refer to him as "the man." There are two reasons for doing so: First, he fits the general and generally accepted description of an unmodified, male, human-model being —walking upright, having opposable thumbs and possessing the other typical characteristics of the profession; and second, because his name has been taken from him.[12]

This emphasis on a lack of body modification along with the fullness and wholeness of Wakim is used to prepare us for the mutilation that Anubis proceeds to inflict on the amnesiac god. This particular mutilation evokes Set and Osiris's relationship in traditional Egyptian myth, specifically the part Set played in the death of Osiris.[13] Wakim's body is technologically molded to emphasize the interchangeable nature of life and death by making Wakim question the idea of living itself. But it is the nature of his modification that most clearly evokes Set's involvement with the Osiris myth. Anubis mutilates and temporarily replaces Wakim's limbs with metal prostheses to highlight the fluidity of the body and the ease with which it might be changed:

> The body-cutting machine rolls into the hall, and the prosthetic replacement machine follows it. Wakim looks away from them, but they draw up beside him and stop.
> The first machine extrudes restrainers and holds him.
> "Human arms are weak," says Anubis. "Let these be removed."
> The man screams as the saw blades hum. Then he passes out. The dead continue their dance. When Wakim awakens, two seamless silver arms hang at his sides, cold and insensitive.[14]

12 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 2.
13 Pinch, *Egyptian Myth*, 32.
14 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 6.

This is then followed by the mutilation of his genitals, and though the act is this time self-inflicted, it is upon Anubis' command:

> "Now," says Anubis, "seize your manhood in your right hand and burn it away."
> Wakim licks his lips.
> "Master…" he says.
> "Do it!"
> He does this thing, and he falls to unconsciousness before he has finished.
> When he awakens again and looks down upon himself, he is all of gleaming silver, sexless and strong.[15]

This forced self-mutilation, specifically the removal of his penis by Wakim's own hands, becomes an act of sadism and humiliation on Anubis' part, mirroring the Osiris myth and the removal of his genitalia, which is then used to create Horus. This is even more ironic, considering Set's role as the perpetrator of Osiris's mutilation in one version of his myth.[16] However, Osiris's bodily pieces were still considered perfect in this myth and hence able to be amalgamated to restore the whole, as opposed to Wakim, whose body in Zelazny's text is irreparably maimed in order to distance himself from his true identity.

Anubis then discusses the integration of machinery into the body, tying it into questions of the self. If the body is completely mechanical, is the individual still alive? It seems Zelazny is playing with the Ship of Theseus paradox, by which Wakim/Set's identity is called into question by the act of modification—substituting parts with replacements until there is nothing of the original body left. Anubis confuses this further by temporarily removing Wakim's consciousness and connecting it to monitors and screens in order to introduce him to Osiris and the House of Life. Compounding this dysphoria of self, Wakim is mutilated without knowing that he is Set, resulting in a furious god when his memory is restored, as his strength has been impeded by this violation.[17] I argue that the true purpose of Anubis's constant modifications is an attempt to obfuscate Wakim's true identity by calling all identities into question. If Osiris's parts were beautiful

15 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 7.
16 Plutarch, *Moralia*, v.
17 Killing someone by beheading or dismemberment was thought to restrict their power in the afterlife; Pinch, *Egyptian Myth*, 96.

in spite of being separate, then Anubis's mutilation and constant replacements of Wakim's body serves to hide the perfection of the body.

The body exists in a binary state in the text, capable of switching between flesh and metal, and living and dead on the whims of the gods. Nonetheless, Anubis comments on the paradox of life and death as both one and the same, much to Wakim's frustration:

> "I do not understand," says Wakim. "You used the superlative. You called for one answer. You named two things, however."
> "Did I?" asks Anubis. "Really? Just because I used two words, does it mean that I have named two separate and distinct things? May a thing not have more than one name? Take yourself for an example. What are you?"
> "I do not know."
> "That may be the beginning of wisdom, then. You could as easily be a machine which I chose to incarnate as a man for a time and have now returned to a metal casing, as you could be a man whom I have chosen to incarnate as a machine."[18]

The transitory nature of the body is represented by the House of the Dead being full of living corpses, subject to Anubis's whims, while the House of the Living is full of living beings being repaired for reincarnation. Life and death are nearly identical at a certain point, and the novel's idea of temporal fugue, by which an individual can exist outside of time, allows individuals to occupy multiple states of being. Existence becomes a matter of controversy, as Anubis attempts to complicate matters further by introducing the idea of sleep and existence as a paradox:

> "A moment ago you said that sleep and death were two different things. Is it that the period of time involved makes a difference?"
> "No," says Wakim, "it is a matter of existence. After sleep there comes wakefulness, and the life is still present. When I exist, I know it. When I do not, I know nothing."
> "Life, then, is nothing?"
> "No."
> "Life, then, is existing? Like these dead?"

18 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 8.

> "No," says Wakim. "It is knowing you exist, at least some of the time."[19]

Wakim's conflict lies in ambiguity. He is Wakim, but he is also Set. He is made perfect by Anubis, but he was also perfect at birth. He is a destroyer, but also a necessary force for renewal, and even contributes to the creation of new life, as later on in the story he is responsible for the impregnation of the nurse Megra, as I go on to discuss.

Kaye Mitchell, in her essay "Bodies That Matter: Science Fiction Technoculture and the Gendered Body" (2006), discusses the cyborg and its connection with our perceptions of gender: "Even before the advent of cyborgs and prostheses", she notes, "the body bore the 'data' of the discourses—e.g., of sex and death—with which it was habitually and conventionally clad".[20] The body as a receptacle of such "data" might be readily applied to Wakim's mutilation; the forcible removal of his masculinity eliminates a core part of Set's identity, preventing him from accessing the "memory banks" that would allow him freedom. The name Wakim is a work of fiction by Anubis, another way to overwrite Set's identity beyond its bodily aspect. Names are incredibly important in Egyptian myth, and were considered a vital part of an individual's personality, so to deny Set's name is to deny an essential aspect of who and what Set is.[21] Set's identity is submerged beneath metallic bodily modifications and new names, and it is only through the paradoxical relationship with his father/son Thoth that he is able to restore his original identity and become whole again. Thoth is both father and son to Set, which allows Thoth to engage with Set outside of linear time and free him from Anubis's manipulations. This is important not just to Set's identity but to Thoth's as well: filiations often followed personal names in monumental inscriptions in ancient Egypt, acting as an additional way to express one's individuality. Being aware of their parentage means that Thoth and Set can present more complete versions of their identities.[22]

Continuing the theme of binaries, Osiris himself commits acts of violation and mutilation, consigning individuals to eternal life, forcing an enemy into life as a carpet capable of feeling people step on him; he is quite literally beneath them, downtrodden. The gods seem to have lost their way, no longer respecting

19 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 9.
20 Mitchell, "Bodies That Matter", 112.
21 Vittman, "Personal Names", 1.
22 Vittman, "Personal Names", 2.

the body, with Osiris tormenting living skulls, throwing tantrums, and taking out his rage on the eternally living:

> "Oh clever skull, to so have tricked the fink god!"
> Consulting the panel and seeing that it is the carpet which has spoken, Osiris moves to the center of the room and begins jumping up and down. There grows up a field of wailing.[23]

Osiris's and Anubis's childish games and petty revenge plots obfuscate the true conflict of the text, embodied by the Thing That Cries In The Night. This entity is presented as an omnipotent force of nature, unable to be killed or harmed except by Set, which might be a reference to Apophis (most often represented as Ra's nemesis in myth and representative of a solar eclipse), though Zelazny never fully defines the entity beyond its destructive nature.[24] Osiris and Anubis believe the creature dead, and their detachment from responsibility and duty has blinded them to its return. It is only their enemy Thoth who devotes himself to keeping the monster contained until Set can be restored. Notably Osiris and Anubis are ultimately killed and replaced, with Osiris superseded by Horus, and Anubis by a fellow immortal. The replacements are explicitly noted to be superior rulers, and Thoth is able to become more involved in the managing of the universe, striving to prevent further abuse of power by the hands of the other gods. It is through the removal of older gods and instead the introduction of Thoth, who is noted to exist simultaneously in and out of the past, present and future, that balance is restored to the universe.[25]

Set being the hero of the tale is unusual, as he is often depicted as an antagonistic force in ancient Egypt, though he is generally considered a necessary evil due to his overwhelming strength.[26] Ra, in particular, favors Set in the "Contendings", afraid of alienating Set and risking losing his assistance with Apophis, in a particularly shocking move:

> Then Pre-Harakhti became exceedingly angry, for it was Pre's wish to give the office to Seth, great of strength, the son of Nut. And

23 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 63.
24 Pinch, *Egyptian Myth*, 63.
25 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 154.
26 Pinch, *Egyptian Myth*, 42.

> Onuris uttered a loud cry before the Ennead, saying: "What shall we do?"[27]

Set in *Creatures* is portrayed as a necessary evil (due to his constant need to destroy), the only being capable of defeating the Thing That Cries In The Night, who is heavily implied to be Apophis and/or its nemesis Atum. Atum is the sun god Ra as a creator, and Zelazny portrays The Thing That Cries In The Night as a paradoxical entity, being both creator and destroyer.[28] Even stranger is *Creatures*' portrayal of Set as Isis's husband and Thoth's father. While Set and Isis are not lovers in the traditional myths, there are moments of seduction between the two, as when Isis disguises herself as a beautiful woman to distract Set during his competition with Horus, which may account for this reimagined relationship in Zelazny's text.[29] Set's relationship with Thoth is even more unusual, as they are both noted to exist in a strange temporal fugue state, allowing Set to be both father and son to Thoth, a relationship that has no basis in Egyptian mythology. The constantly shifting relationship between the pair shows a fluid interpretation of binary concepts, in which zero and one are interchangeable, and, as a result, so are life and death.

Set constantly seeks himself, and his pursuit of identity is portrayed as both inevitable and necessary. Yet his recovery of identity also forces him to embody the archetype that Set represents in ancient Egyptian sources: the destroyer. Set is rendered feral, forced to seek out conflict lest he destroys himself, while Thoth becomes Set's caretaker, creating imaginary conflicts to keep his father/son alive until the next crisis arrives. Just as Ra appeases Set in Egyptian myth, Thoth must appease Set so as not to lose their greatest weapon.

Set's identity is restored through the recovery of his weapons and tools: boots, gauntlets and a wand. This usage of "technology" in order to transition from Wakim to Set follows the notion of technology as an instrument of progress. Tom Idema argues that this is a necessary part of Ur-stories, pointing out that one starts with their rational mind and body, and through the invention/acquisition of technology the individual becomes more complete.[30] Wakim is given a body and knowledge of the binary nature of the universe and, through the recovery of

27 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, II, 214; Beatty and Gardiner, *The Library of A. Chester Beatty*, 14.
28 Pinch, *Egyptian Myth*, 22.
29 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, II, 214; Beatty and Gardiner, *The Library of A. Chester Beatty*, 14.
30 Idema, *Stages of Transmutation*, 14.

his creations, becomes whole once more. But if Wakim is indirectly in the pursuit of life and, through it, immortality, then the pursuit of death is correspondingly presented through the planet of Blis, the God Horus and, oddly enough, Greek myth. Blis is where the immortals are first introduced and through them, we encounter one of their methods of prophecy. Having been described by Anubis earlier in the novel, the portion of the text set in Blis is where the mechanics of life and death are truly laid bare.

## A Multitude of Myths

Blis is a world where life has run completely amuck. Wakim is sent there to search for Thoth,[31] and, in doing so, finds a world full of life, a world where death has little presence.[32] Blis's technology has advanced to the point that disease and death have nearly been conquered. All that seems to matter is finding a way to stave off boredom. Citizens are obsessed with creating more life to break the monotony of long lives that do not end. The only real investment that the citizens have is their curiosity towards death. It is on Blis that the immortal gods hide, because here they are indistinguishable from the normal humans.

Blis allows for genetic modification, and parents may choose to alter their children by selecting specific traits and personalities. We are introduced to the nurse Megra, and it is through her that we are presented with a mortal's pursuit of infinity and immortality, similar to her pursuit of a lover so that she might bear a child, which pushes her to Wakim:

> Being old-fashioned, all that Megra's own parents had wanted was a cobalt-eyed doll with the strength of a dozen or so men, so that the kid could take care of herself in life. However, after having taken care of herself successfully for eighteen years, Megra decided that the time had come to contribute to the general breathing. It takes two to strive for infinity.[33]

Megra's name seems to be a reference to first wife of Hercules, Megara. Both women fall in love with non-human beings, bear them children, and suffer as

31 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 26.
32 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 28.
33 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 34.

a result of their relationship with those divinities. The pursuit of Wakim nearly dooms Megra as it results in Isis imprisoning her as a mechanical oracle out of jealousy.[34] However, unlike Megara, Megra is presented as far closer to Wakim than Megara was to Hercules, wielding great (indeed, Herculean) strength herself, and actively pursuing him. She even rejects him in favor of Horus by the novel's end, enduring despite the trauma inflicted on her by Isis. But even before Isis torments her, Megra is already traumatized by the introduction of a plague to Blis that is set to destroy the planet, a planet where death is poorly understood, and as such treated as a novelty rather than a serious event.

Death has become a perversion on Blis, as the concept of ceremony and funeral rites have become a sideshow. Individuals treat suicide the same way we treat carnival shows, selling tickets to a random man's self-immolation. His death is treated with skepticism to the point that the audience claims his death was faked:

> A man is going to commit suicide and be buried in that tent. The grave is already dug and all the tickets have been sold. The audience is growing restless now, though. The performer won't do it without proper religious accompaniment, and we can't sober up the preacher.[35]

The citizens of Bliss are ignorant as to how a person might actually die. The lack of care for the dead occurs often in the story, with bodies and corpses being mistreated or abused, frequently comically, such as Osiris's aforementioned human rug.[36] Even the rituals and rites with which the dead would be provided are treated as a technical hurdle instead of something worthy of awe or respect. Consider the care and elaborate process of mummification in Egyptian culture compared to bodies being left to rot out in the open with no care at in Zelazny's mythology. This lack of care toward the mutilation of the body is exemplified by the oracles and soothsayers throughout the story. Osiris' son Horus consults two distinct types of oracles over the course of his quest: one magical, the other mechanical. The first is a haruspex named Freydag who uses entrails to see the future. In order to see the future on behalf of a god, Freydag uses the organs of a rival haruspex, much to the dying soothsayer's annoyance. Freydag is incompe-

34 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 75.
35 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 18.
36 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 97.

tent at both cutting the body and reading the entrails, forcing the failing man to read his own viscera as he dies:

> "Silence!" cries Freydag. "I did not call thee in for a consultation!"
> "They are my innards! I will not have them misread by a poseur!"[37]

The once lofty ritual of reading entrails has been reduced to incompetence and petty competition, with the rival seers attempting to frame or kill one another. The irony of the rival being better at reading his own body is not lost on Horus, who desperately questions the dying seer, but fails to get an answer before the man expires. The disrespect toward the seer's body prevents its proper understanding, and the prophecies are perverted and misinterpreted.

The mechanical oracle, meanwhile, is a "sexcomp": a computer powered by a human that requires sex to provide answers. In both cases, magical and scientific, the body is violated—often without hesitation—in the pursuit of knowledge, and Horus is horrified by both, having been kept by his father's side and isolated for most of his life. Old myths of fortune telling are integrated with technology, as a form of search engine, highlighting the text's union of flesh and machinery to the point that the narrative proposes that a machine is not complete until it has a biological body attached to it:

> As has been demonstrated on occasions too numerous to cite, the whole machine requires a gender. Now that man and machine undergo frequent interchanges of components and entire systems, it is possible for a complete being to start at any point in the mech-man spectrum and to range the entire gamut. Man, the presumptuous organ, has therefore achieved his apotheosis or union with the Gaskethead through sacrifice and redemption, as it were.[38]

This passage ties back to the idea of the body as a computer with memory banks and data. While the machine can calculate and process data, it appears that the body is necessary to provide the data/memory. And since memory and identity are tied to one another, the machine becomes alive and by extension complete, with the addition of the living vessel. This is not an unusual concept in New Wave sci-fi, as both bodies and computers are vessels of information, with literary

37 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 43.
38 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 57.

critics such as N. Katherine Hayles stating that "[w]hen information loses its body, equating humans and computers is especially easy, for the materiality in which the thinking mind is instantiated appears incidental to its essential nature".[39] There is an argument for sexism with Megra being trapped by Isis in the form of a sexcomp and sexually exploited. Much like Osiris and the rug, and Anubis mutilating Wakim, the gods show little to no respect for the human body and abuse it often and openly. Likewise, the scene where Horus utilizes a sexcomp is explicitly uncomfortable and strange.[40] The sexcomp is one such intersection of materiality and thought, being able to provide answers "only for so long as the inquirer can keep it properly stimulated"; this exchange is explicitly intellectual as well as sexual, as the reciprocation of ideas is presented as equal to the reciprocation of pleasure.[41] Thus the sexcomp is intended to provide mental as well as sexual stimulation. Furthermore, as these oracles are often used for romantic questions, there is a constant sense of romantic ideas being exchanged during this sexual transaction. It is telling that Horus falls in love with one such sexcomp, which is subsequently revealed to be an imprisoned Megra.[42] Isis, jealous of Megra having sex with Set, converted her into a sexcomp. It is here that the exchange of sex, love, and ideas is at its most explicit, with Megra commanding Horus to "love me, and tell me more".[43] Horus falling in love with Megra frees her, and the two are wed at the end of the story, raising the child whom she bore for Set.

Another reference to an oracle, but not an oracle itself, is encountered by Thoth when he attempts to jog Set's memory. He visits a species referred to as the Norns (named after deities in Norse mythology who shape the fate of humans) and had previously commissioned three of them to build him a replica of a weapon that belonged to Set. In order to repay their labor, Thoth must provide them with an eye, as the Norns (in Zelazny's text, though not in original Norse sources) are naturally blind. The process requires surgery and is a temporary measure, for several reasons:

> "Oh, they seldom last. After a time, their bodies reject them. Generally, though, their neighbors blind them."

39 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 2.

40 The female androids and cyborgs that appear in fiction reinforce the cultural production of femininity as accessible sexuality rather than invulnerable authority, as use/object rather than user/subject. See Cranny-Francis, "The Erotics of the (cy)Borg", 156.

41 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 58.

42 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 84.

43 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 83.

> "Why is that?"
> "I believe it is because they go about boasting how, among all their people, only they are able to see. This results in a speedy democratization of affairs."[44]

Here, the Norse shapers of fate are reimagined as engineers and weapon makers who recapture the past. While they lack the ability to see or foretell the future, they assist Thoth in putting the universe back in balance through their creations. Their blindness and the surgery that is able to overcome this (albeit impermanently) is another of the text's bodily modifications, but instead of the previous oracles, whose bodies were in one way or another violated, the Norns willingly chose to change, being temporarily happy with this modification. While the Norns are derived from Norse mythology, they also call to mind the Fates of Greco-Roman myth who share a single eye, this mythological mashup on Zelazny's part essentially rendering the Norns another of the text's chimeras. Considering Zelazny's fascination with binary concepts and ideas, the introduction of Norse mythology to twin with the Greco-Roman reference could be an attempt to explore the often similar myths and ideas shared among cultures, creating yet another pairing.

These types of bodily readings and surgical interventions seem more of a haruspex's job, which tends toward Roman and Greek mythology, rather than Egyptian. Zelazny seems to enjoy introducing outsider myths into the story, not as distinct myths, but as additions weaved into the existing Egyptian myth. The three Fates/Norns appear as a species of alien that can forge weaponry and are capable of cannibalism of their own kind.[45] The aforementioned haruspex is portrayed as devoted to a serious occupation, though it is one that is plagued by betrayal and death. Both references parody Greek myth, which correlates with how irreverently Zelazny treats Egyptian myth, too.

The most direct reference to Greek myth, however, is in Set's brother Typhon. In terms of mythological function, Set and Typhon are both destroyers, and in certain versions of their myths, such as Plutarch's, Typhon *is* Set.[46] Zelazny is well aware of this and renders Typhon a shadow entity who only appears once Wakim is let loose into the universe. He appears pages after Wakim is freed, quite

44 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 69.
45 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 70.
46 Plutarch, *Moralia*, v.

literally following his brother like a shadow.[47] Typhon's nature as an autonomous shadow searching for Set appears to be a reference to the shadow of the body (or *shut*), which in Egyptian myth is an essential component of a person, together with other aspects such as their name (or *ren*), body (*khet*) and personality (*ba*).[48] While these specific terms are not used in the text, Typhon (the shadow) is searching for the body (*khet*) of Wakim which contains the god Set (*ba* and *ren*).

Typhon being a shadow allows Zelazny to utilize a scientific concept that, at the point when he wrote his novel, had only been recently discovered: the black hole. The text was published in 1969, and the first black hole–Cygnus X-1–was discovered in 1964.[49] Despite still being a largely theoretical concept at the time the novel was written, the basic function of the black hole as appearing as an empty space from which nothing can escape is commented on, with Typhon being feared by everyone but Set because of his dangerous nature. Typhon is the vessel for this phenomenon, and the black hole inflicts permanent changes on the universe, such as when Typhon cripples Anubis's arm.[50] The black hole is insurmountable, and even Typhon is not immune to its power. This is best seen in Typhon sacrificing himself to save Set, consumed by his own power, referred to here as an abyss:

> "Skagganauk Abyss, sometimes called the chasm in the sky," says Anubis, "is the place where it is said that all things stop and nothing exits."
> "There are many very empty spaces in the universe."[51]

The abyss and its ability to remove objects from reality, notably outside of the binary paradox of existence, results in Typhon being the most feared of the gods. He is an aberration, an entity that does not belong in the pantheon, literally an outsider god. His presence is an invasion from outside: an existence that should not be. Considering Set and Thoth being paradoxical entities, it could be argued their nature invites Typhon into the narrative. As such, Egyptian myths' multifaceted nature allows for outside influences to enter the narrative, which

47 In the great Hall of the House of the Dead there is an enormous shadow upon the wall, behind the throne of Anubis. It might almost be a decoration, inlaid or painted, save that its blackness is absolute and seems to hold within it something of a limitless depth. Furthermore, there is a slight movement to it; Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 29.
48 Wendrich, "Identity and Personhood", 208.
49 *Bowyer, Byram, Chubb, and Friedman, "Cosmic X-ray Sources"*.
50 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 37.
51 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 82.

is why the oracles and the Norns enter the story so seamlessly. The story has Typhon and Thoth in search of Set, as he serves as the counterpoint to both of them. Set is a necessary part of both gods' lives as their existence is dependent on Set himself existing, and Thoth assists in reuniting Set to his shadow, thus reuniting him with all facets of himself. While Set is complete at the end of the narrative, he is not much different from Wakim (albeit more destructive). As a result, the personal complexities of the narrative go toward his son/father Thoth. For while Set has much done to him, it is Thoth who pushes the narrative forward through his actions and presence.

## Detached from Time but not Wisdom

If Set is the initial protagonist of the narrative, Thoth is the protagonist for the second half of the story. Much like Set, Thoth is introduced under a different name: "The Prince Who Was A Thousand". Yet, unlike Set, who unintentionally enters the conflict between the gods openly, Thoth hides to protect himself from conflict. While Horus is set up as Set's nemesis and equal, it is in fact Thoth who better fulfills the role as Set's foil, serving as a peacekeeper to contrast Set's violent nature. Thoth serves as a mediator within the text, a figure attempting to destroy the Thing That Cries In The Night, while also seeking to avenge his father/son Set by killing Osiris and Anubis (calling back to his role as a mediator in the "Contendings of Horus and Set"). He is a being unbound by time, and as a result is the narrative's wisest character, which reflects his depictions in Egyptian myth, a figure aware of a conflict the rest of his fellow gods have ignored. His sections are thoughtful, often marked by poetry, which coincides with his status as a god of wisdom:

> You did not approve,
> because my father Set,
> mightiest warrior who ever lived,
> was also our son in those days gone by,
> our son, those days in Marachek,
> after I had broken the temporal barrier,
> to live once again through all time,
> for the wisdom that is Past.[52]

52 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 51.

In this passage, we see that the nature of his temporal fugue is based on his desire for wisdom. It is never made clear whether he is omniscient, but each of his actions ultimately works in his favor. He succeeds in restoring his father/son Set to power, but in doing so binds himself to creating enemies for Set to destroy, essentially becoming the one to Set's zero. As a result of his nature as a being unbound by time, he is capable of managing the universe and the Houses of Life and Death, all while keeping Set in check. Thoth's body does not suffer, nor is he under the purview of life and death, making him the second most powerful god in the narrative after Set himself.

For all his strength, however, there is one thing that Thoth cannot control: the fate of his wife Nephytha, who was destroyed during the conflict that wiped Set's memories. While Thoth's body is removed from the binary of life and death by his pursuit of wisdom, his wife's body is destroyed by the conflict.[53] She no longer has a physical body and has been reduced to a formless entity who occupies a planet that has its ocean as an atmosphere, possibly invoking the god Nun in Egyptian mythology: the primeval waters. She is unable to die, but has no life beyond simply existing and occasionally talking to her husband. The following fragment from one of their conversations illustrates her plight particularly well:

> What may I tell thee, to be polite rather than truthful? That I am not sickened by this life that is not life? That I do not long to be a woman once again, rather than a breath, a color, a movement? That I do not ache to touch thee once again, and to feel once again thy touch upon my body? Thou knowest all that I might say, but no one god possesses all powers.[54]

Nephytha is never spoken of by any other character, and her fate seems to be doomed to remain a mere idea. Her name's similarity to Nephthys is intriguing, hinting at a connection to Set, as Nephthys was Set's consort in Egyptian mythology.[55] But she and Set never interact, and any potential influence she could have on both Set and Thoth is relegated to mourning on Thoth's part and silence on Set's, an interesting reversal of Nephthys' role as a mourner in Egyptian mythology. Her body is the most violated in the novel by virtue of no longer being allowed to exist. Like Thoth, her body is, in a sense, unbound. But Thoth

53 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 51.
54 Zelazny, *Creatures of Light and Darkness*, 52.
55 Pinch, *Egyptian Myth*, 35.

is granted wisdom by his freedom, while Nephytha simply suffers. The two are yet another pair, representing escape and imprisonment from the binary code of the universe, with Thoth free to move about the universe, but trapped in his mission, while his wife is trapped in a state of undeath, but free from the endless politicking and backstabbing of her family.

## Conclusion

When considering *Creatures of Light and Darkness* within Zelazny's literary output, ambition seems to be the operative word. Few other Zelazny stories reach this peak of textual and narrative experimentation. While it may have been intended as a parody of the New Wave, Zelazny nevertheless creates what could be the most intrinsically New Wave novel of all. The introspection by which he examines not only mythology and science fiction, but the act of writing itself lends a certain epic scope to the novel. In celebrating the various forms and styles of literature within this text, Zelazny exalts the methods by which myths are conveyed. These myths are compatible with scientific concepts such as binary code, while also blending with astrophysics' theoretical concepts such as black holes. All of the characters are motivated by the pursuit of infinity, whether it is through a permanent death like Nephytha, or absolute control like Anubis. Their pursuit is fundamental to their natures as gods, in much the same way that binary code is the building block by which all computer code is formed. The essential parts of the universe are broken down to its spiritual binary code: life and death. And this binary allows for the existence of additional binaries born from this divide. Zelazny meshes this spiritual binary with the binary relationships between the gods, and in doing so, creates a simultaneously simple and complex novel (and in doing so, the binary becomes metatextual). The reason Egyptian myth works so well here is because it presents a multimodal approach to the binary of life and death, hence allowing for the exploration of fractal perspectives in Egyptian myth, as reflected in the novel. While the binary is presented in high terms such as various pairings of gods and universe-shattering events, it is also presented on smaller and often individual levels concerning the body and the soul. No matter how absurd the imagery Zelazny invokes, he still remembers the importance of the body. Whether the characters are gods, monsters or machines, their bodies (and the violation of their bodies) are at the heart of the novel: the body and its binary nature, flesh and circuitry, zero and one. Zelazny has given us a universe where paradoxes abound, and yet the universe finds a way to keep itself whole.

Whether it is through death or life, the universe of *Creatures of Light and Darkness* continues toward infinity.

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