

# worn PEACE piece (warning: long)

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 29 Mar 1998

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Damien Broderick — 29 Mar 1998, 22:47

Frolicking through the archives with my tongue hanging out, I find that the matter of PEACE has cropped up several times. Once more, then:

In 1986, I published some thoughts on the novel in an Australian fanzine called THE NOTIONAL. Its international distribution was... well, notional.

So I republished the piece in the March 1996 issue of The New York Review of Science Fiction, where it appeared alongside a tentative chronology of the book by William M. Schuyler, Jr. Since it seems that not everyone here has access to the NYRSF, I thought I'd dump it on you forthwith, even though several of the points raised are now commonplaces. Apologies for the length and its rambling ways:

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\*Peace\* appears to be the extended written meditation of Alden Dennis Weer, ailing elderly Midwest gentleman and president of a fruit juice plant. Gene Wolfe has gone on record as saying that Den Weer more closely resembles the author than most critics have realised. Wolfe for years wrote professionally for, and edited, a magazine called `Plant Engineering' which dealt not with genetic botany but with industrial mechanical engineering. Weer's juice plant synthesises orange juice out of potatoes, so successfully that Cassionsville and the Kanakessee Valley, its once rich and various farmland surrounds, are blighted by monocropping, as its Irish settlers' homelands had been several centuries earlier.

The name of the narrator of Wolfe's \*The Fifth Head of Cerberus\*, never given in that text, can be determined to be Gene Wolfe. A famous story by Wolfe is `The Hero as Werwolf'. This apparent spelling mistake is permitted by the dictionary, a volume Wolfe is not unacquainted with. It has been suggested that the lost `e' from `werwolf' lives at the end of the author's name. I instantly assumed that Alden Dennis Weer is, as it were, a weerwolfe.

The first line of the novel is this: `The elm tree planted by Eleanor Bold, the judge's daughter, fell last night.' What does not fall until page 193, in my 246 page copy, is the other shoe. Miss Bold, now married to one Porter, `wants to plant a tree on my grave when I'm gone. That's her hobby: she plants trees of endangered American species on the graves of her friends.' I had missed this absolutely fundamental revelation until Yvonne Rousseau explained it, and I felt sick with shame. Even so, at least I knew from the first paragraph that Weer was \*probably\* dead: `I was afraid I was going to have an attack, and then, fuzzily, thought that perhaps the heart attack had wakened me, and then that I might be dead... it seemed to me that the whole house was melting like the candle, going soft and running down into the lawn.' Yes indeed. The house is his skull, pierced by the roots of Eleanor Bold's now ancient, vast and fallen elm.

What, then, of his claim to have built a mnemonic house, each room the replica of one from his life? Alden does just this, in the chambered cavities of his skull. How do we know? On page 217, in a poignant quotation from the \*Necronomicon\*, that wicked book invented by Lovecraft and

here re invented by Wolfe, a man is called back from death. 'His eyes were no more; their sockets seemed dark pits, save that there flickered behind them a point of light... I knew this spark for the soul of the dead man, seeking now in all the chambers under the vault of the skull its old resting places.'

\*Peace\*, then, is the peace of \*requiescat in pace\*.

The book is, to a quite unparalleled extent, a tissue of lies, or at least of substantial evasion. Lou Gold, Jewish refugee and 'rare' book dealer, is, like one of Vonnegut's dubious saints, a fraud in search of deeper truths than mere veracity. If \*Peace\* is enlivened by many quoted voices, each distinct and agreeable, many of them are thrown by Gold's ventriloquist's throat. Does this invalidate them? We can't know. Gold tells Weer, and us, 'The world shapes itself, I find, very fast, to what I write.' (And if to the writings of Gold the literary forger, so too, no doubt, to those of Wolfe the sf speculator.) 'Or I write more than I know perhaps all of us who do what I do.' It will surely occur to any suspicious reader at this point to wonder if \*Peace\* itself is a concoction of Gold's. I do not think it is but perhaps, on the argument just given, it does not matter and could never be tested.

Certainly Wolfe writes more than \*we\* know, at least until we have done a fair bit of digging. Alden does some digging, looking for gold, which does not exist because his source is a fabrication of Gold's. I quickly speculated that he then finds the gold and kills the middle aged librarian who has led him to it (and become his lover). But is she dead? Does Weer become rich from this find? As well ask who killed Weer's aunt Olivia, run down by a car while crossing the street in search of a little something from Dubarry's Bakery. Alden himself? Or one of aunt Vi's four suitors, Professor Peacock, a man whose laces drag like a small boy's, though he's agile enough; there is a clue concerning his ownership of a car which I leave to you to hunt out for yourself. Certainly Alden, as a small boy, causes the lingering death of another child, Eleanor Bold's nephew (conceivably the first of those planted under a tree), and the death by freezing of a young workmate at the juice plant during a prank gone wrong.

Wolfe teases and provokes us, but only if we are on our toes. Gold's fraud uncovered, Weer's potential denunciation is averted when Sherry, Gold's saucy 16 year old daughter, unprotected against pregnancy, takes him to bed. Some 200 pages earlier, a little while later, Sherry Gold visits the doctor. 'You seem to be putting on weight, Miss Gold,' Alden imagines the doctor telling her. A hairy dogman from a travelling carney writes Weer a letter about the pitiful death of Doris, a new girl with the show, 'a kid that belonged to Mr. Mason,' Weer's informant tells him, '(whoever he was - I myself never laid eyes on him...)' Is Doris the bastard child of Weer and Sherry? There are reasons for doubting this (a mason is, of course, a worker in stone, of which more anon), but nothing is certain or self evident in this astonishing novel about identity and fabrication.

This theme of making, self-making and self-denying, is woven in a thousand threads. Three weeks after going to live with his aunt Vi, Weer read a portion of a fairy tale in a storybook. Because he nodded off before the end, and felt it 'a sort of desecration to begin an evening's reading in the middle of a story,' he never finished it. A princess is wooed unsuccessfully by men of earth, sea and air; these are Vi's three principal suitors, as it eventuates, and the lucky (?) fourth, so soon to be widowed by the careless motorist who runs Vi down, is Julius Smart, pharmacist, and founder of the juice factory Alden first works for and finally owns. Julius tells an extraordinary Gothic tale of his patron, a paranoid pharmacist whose concoctions turn people into freaks, including himself. The carney dogman is perhaps one of his productions; its mother, whose hands spring direct from her shoulders, seems to be a natural forerunner of those luckless victims of pharmacy, the Thalidomide babies. I suspect that the chemist's fatal disorder (though this is never explained in the book) is the fantastically rare genetic disease \*myositis

ossificans progressiva\*, which turns ordinary tissue into bone (or `stone') so the entire body grows rigid, rather as a corpse does, before it liquefies. In short, natural and pharmacological causation is systematically and fiendishly confounded, to our confusion and delight.

As it chanced, I read and ferreted about in \*Peace\* at the same time I was gnawing on Omni's 1985 `world's hardest IQ test', which offered 48 nifty little nasties requiring expertise ranging from Greek mythology to the theory of limits, etymology to the Periodic table of the elements. The two experiences, at a simple-minded level (so to speak), were not dissimilar. But I certainly don't wish to reduce this complex and glowing book to a series of intellectual gags.

In 1985, I raised some of these points with Gene Wolfe, who confirmed my guess about `weerwolfe', which made me happy; agreed that Professor Peacock was indeed Aunt Vi's motorised killer, which made me chuckle and rub my hands together maniacally; and drew back in distress from my suggestion that Gold's invented `gold' actually came into existence as a result of his forged document, only to be retrieved by Alden. No, no, Wolfe said, pained; \*Peace\* is, on that level, a work of realism. Alden is rich because he is Aunt Vi's heir, and therefore crabby old Julius Smart's.

We swapped gifts as we parted. I gave Wolfe a copy of my Aussie anthology \*Strange Attractors\* which is dedicated jointly to him and to Ursula Le Guin. He gave me, in return, a pleasing morsel. `What's the brand name of Julius's synthetic orange juice?' he asked. This hideous stuff is the fluid which flows like a phony alchemist's fake gold through the entire book; its name, never mentioned, was proposed by Aunt Vi, orientalist and wag. In fact I'd spent some time brooding on this matter, but had to confess myself beaten. `Why,' said evil Gene Wolfe, `Tang, of course.'

Many strange little unanswered questions linger to tease the mind. There's that mysterious evening spent alone in a hotel room and its adjacent hallway by Alden's aunt Bella, small town journalist. Bella `beheld a swimming and irregular glow' through the hotel's frosted windows, `as though a thousand carriage lamps were moving to and fro in a mist...' together with `roaring, babbling sounds... punctuated... by the braying of savage trumps and bombardons...' No one else heard, saw or reported this extravaganza except the lady in the room which proved to be Bella's own though Bella was in the hallway at the time the report was made. A tiny, beautiful enigma. I'd like to hear what other readers have made of its significance.

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And still would...

Damien Broderick

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Michael Straight — 02 Apr 1998, 13:29 · follows Damien Broderick

Thanks for the interesting article. When I first heard about Peace, I put it at the bottom of my list of Wolfe books to read because I'm more of a SF fan, but it turned out to be one of my favorites.

On Sun, 29 Mar 1998, Damien Broderick wrote:

The first line of the novel is this: `The elm tree planted by Eleanor Bold, the judge's daughter, fell last night.' What does not fall until page 193, in my 246 page copy, is the other shoe. Miss Bold, now married to one Porter, `wants to plant a tree on my grave when I'm gone. That's her hobby: she plants trees of endangered American species on the graves of her friends.' I had missed this absolutely fundamental revelation until Yvonne Rousseau explained it, and I felt sick with shame. Even so, at least I

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Weer's house also recalls the old (medieval?) technique of memory by constructing a mental "castle" and, in the mind's eye, placing each thing or event you want to remember in a separate room of your castle, using images to represent what you want to remember. For instance, one's "Bible Room" might have 14 shields for each of the Apostles (including St. Paul and St. Matthias) with pictures representing traditions about each one (an upside-down cross for St. Peter, a bag of silver coins for Judas, etc.)

Reference to this technique can also be found in the Soldier books. Is Wolfe himself a practitioner? I knew a fellow in college who claimed to remember things way.

\*Peace\*, then, is the peace of \*requiescat in pace\*.

A bit which I've mentioned before on this list but haven't seen anyone else comment on is the very end (don't have a copy handy to quote) where there is a reference made to the story of the ceramic pillow and a voice calling the young Dennis (from sleep?), hinting at the possibility that the whole book is not the memories of a dead Weer, but young Dennis's dream of his possible future.

Which throws more light on the original ceramic pillow story. Like the Chinese man in the story, young Dennis dreams of a future where he is rich and successful, yet in Weer's story we see hints at what might have motivated the Chinese man to wish his apparently successful life had been different and, when he wakes from the dream, to choose a different path. Will young Dennis wake from the dream and choose a different path, one in which he doesn't kill his boyhood friend?

I also love the story of the Sidhe at the end, enjoying it at face value even though I suspect it must have some connection or echo from Weer's life that I haven't noticed yet. Anyone else see a similarity between the Sidhe and the dogs in Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep*? Does that idea go back further than these two examples? (vagueness to avoid spoilage)

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Great anecdote--I'd noted the similarity of Weer's product to Tang, but naming Aunt Vi as the source, that's great. Too bad Disclave was cancelled. I'd love to meet Wolfe.

-Rostrum