

Short Story 22: Remembrance to Come

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Marc Aramini — 27 Apr 2012, 04:39

Remembrance to Come

This was first published in 1970 in Orbit. I have a feeling it has never been reprinted not necessarily because of its quality or content but because of its “what if this hippy stuff continues even when the country is actually threatened?” SF interpolations, which seem to have dated a bit more than some of Wolfe’s other stories.

SUMMARY:

The story begins “Leaves in his face.” David Paramore, the main character, is a college literature lecturer who, long ago (?), received his diploma surface side with his wife Ruth. He now works underground, kept at the same temperature (83 degrees to make co-eds in body paint comfortable) but he has prepared his Proust lecture on Remembrance of Things Past by going to the surface before the opening of the story. Now he returns to the moving belts of the underground world, but he must be careful not to upset his students, for he has already received two reprimands for belittling the dignity of students.

He makes it a point to say hello to his students for fear of their negative complaints. He eventually raps for order (not yet forbidden) and calls on a girl in only a belt and body paint to comment on the story, and all she can say is that it was just lovely, shattering. His projector shows a scene from Proust, and he quotes: “The idea of perfection which I had within me I had bestowed, in that other time, upon the height of a Victoria, upon the raking thinness of those horses — which now smitten by the desire to see again what I had once loved, as ardent as the desire that had driven me, many years before, along the same paths, I wished to see renewed before my eyes at the moment when Mme. Swann’s enormous coachman — endeavored to curb the ardour of the lying, steel tipped pinions with which they thundered along the ground.” The students read the cartoon bubbles on the projected screen showing the Proust scene, all seeming to move their mouths when they read.

He sees a disturbance in the back and instructs his two most verbose students to dialogue while he switches his camera to the back of the room to see a figure draped in black cloth in shoes instead of the standard sandals and with a box like shroud worn over the head. He is afraid to ask for fear that it is a student who has the right to audit the class just trying to start trouble. Here it comments that his tropical weave coveralls whose design imitated the jeans and sweatshirts of more formal times are hot underground. The staff now wear slogans on their shirts like “Get out of Vietnam”, “God grows his own”, and “make love not sludge” (he is paid a stipend by the sewage authority for this last one on his shirt).

After the lecture, the following quote is telling: “He remained at the console waiting to see if the dark figure at the back of the room had left with the others, and by some trick of thought he felt he had been watching the proceedings himself through the eyes behind those black holes and

had found them remote and inconsequential". He leaves and the black shrouded figure follows him. He retrieves his bike and starts pedaling home. "Since the government did not care much if the members of the liberal arts faculty survived a bomb blast or not, the underground on-campus apartments were the prerogatives of members of the scientific departments". The man in black has a bike and follows him home. "it suddenly occurred to him to wonder why indeed he was hurrying, now that all the goals he had set for himself were reached in emptiness and it was possible to set no more. What could the student under the black cloth do to him that time had not?" He does state that the student's legs are younger than his own.

He leaves his bike in the yard of his house and goes upstairs ponderously (an indication perhaps of his age) and Ruth, an invalid, calls to him from the bed upstairs. He does not want to tell her of his disturbance, but then realizes she already knows when something upsets him and tells her anyway. She compares it to an old social experiment of a boy dressed in black at school who was then made the butt of jokes and then ignored. "We say we're so much freer and more humane than people used to be, but are we really" Well, he's going to make the same test again and see if the results are any different.

The next day the shapeless form waits for him and attends all his classes for the next two days. He makes an appointment with Saunders, the head of his department. David says it is an entrapment attempt, and Saunders, a fake sportsman, comments that the figure has only showed up when he is teaching Proust. David reacts badly when he realizes that Saunders thinks it is his imagination. Saunders replies that it is a tense age where only 1 in 12 will never suffer a mental illness. The machines in the coffee shop dispense psychotropic drugs. Saunders relieves him of teaching duty for four days and tells him to take some para-reserpine capsules (which will show up in Three Fingers). He throws them away.

Later after talking to his wife he finds a disguise to go mess with the student, an old robe and his mortarboard from graduation. He dresses in it and enters his final lecture period. He sits down, and the projector shows: "In bright primary colors the screen showed the rumpled bedroom with its cork-lined walls and the bearded man in the bed. Involuntarily the words formed themselves in his mind: For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say ?I'm going to sleep." — Sometimes too, just as Eve was created from a rib of Adam, so a woman would come into existence while I was sleeping, conceived from some strain in the position of my limbs — When a man is asleep, he has in a circle round him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly hosts?.

He watches his own bent form arrive, and then "without lapse of time" finds himself pursuing his own back on a bike. "soon — the red and yellow leaves were racing past his ears — he would be back. Soon — he seemed to fly. He looked at his hands, and they were liverspotted still, but the spots were fading. He would not teach. He would tell Ruth as they sat together in the folding tin chairs and listened to the droning speakers. He would not teach. He would wake up."

COMMENTARY:

It seems that the "younger" version of David in mortarboard is observing the classes. Whether this is a mental dream state in his youth or in his advanced age is difficult to discern, but the title Remembrance to Come does seem to indicate it is a memory of a future event (would that mean the younger David is thrust forward in time and later in life remembers it?) All this speculation is rendered moot by the ending assertion that "he would not teach. He would wake up." This "waking up" as his liverspots fade either signifies he is old and dying or young and dreaming. The disguise he opts for is the graduation attire that is perhaps at the crux of his

decision to become a teacher and set himself upon the path of disappointment. The story is begun by leaves in his face and finished by the same red and yellow leaves rushing past his ears.

This is the very first Wolfe story, in my opinion, in which exegesis is complicated by an inability to grasp the motivation of the 3rd person non-omniscient narrator. Lack of self-awareness, willful concealment, loss of memory, or plain ignorance are valid reasons and “discoverable” motives in Wolfe’s fiction for an unreliable 1st person narrator, but here we are trapped, as in *Castleview*, *There Are Doors*, and *An Evil Guest*, with an inexplicable motive for that distorted narrative. Why is the 3rd person in Wolfe so tricky? Sometimes that same sense of context left out is most explicable through assessing the narrator’s condition — and there is simply no “I” to assess in this case. It is worthwhile bringing up the idea of involuntary memories — at one point David Paramore teaching seems to see out of the eyes of his visitor, something like an involuntary remembrance.

In this case, hippy anti-war/anti-authoritarian protest has infiltrated the culture, and the students have more power than the professors, though they are clearly underground because of the very real threat of nuclear war and the government still cares for the science department more than “useless” fields like literature, arts, and humanities. The name Paramore means lover (this seems to be probably an Italian version of the French *paramour*, with love) and most of his recollections and Proust quotes are about that perfect unattainable woman or moment, of rushing to be with Ruth and receiving a diploma with her above ground, only to have her as a crippled woman in a bed upstairs. Clearly the people in charge fear the complaints and the ill will of the students, who actually seem to have a whole lot of power to instigate problems and get those in authority disciplined. This topsy turvy world view is the SFnal approach Wolfe chooses for the 60s

protest groups, even extending to body paint as the preferred dress of these students.

Traditional classroom methods (like *READING* the book) have been replaced to some degree by “representations”, and these sluggish students seem to have very little insight into anything : “it’s lovely, lovely, shattering” is some of the most telling analysis at work. Clearly, Ruth, the perfect woman of his imagination, has not turned out that way, as he must take care of her. Can he really undo his life, or is this just the final dream of the old bearded man in the bed?

In this pacifistic, anti-authoritarian, but still threatened by the? bomb? world, everyone has become a little unhinged. All the Proust quotes are about the idealized woman or love or a more perfect time, and David yearns to return to that turning point in his life. The detail that he believes he could walk unseen if his own eyes were concealed is interesting in light of the opening “leaves in his face”.

Reserpine is a (veterinary?) tranquilizer whose side effects can result in hallucinations. If he is indeed trapped in his bed and creating Ruth and his entire life from memory/hallucination then we have him involuntarily trapped in very particular points of his life (teaching Proust but dreaming of real possibilities to attain idealized perfect love). Living underground to avoid fallout but still spouting peace loving 60s platitudes is of course the nightmare of the story and its cultural intersection with “reality”.

ALLUSIONS: Proust’s involuntary memory and reverie of course comes into play, but I can’t help but think that the circular patterns of many of Borges’ stories like “The Circular Ruins” (in which perception is simply a part of a dreamlike cycle) may have influenced the denouement of this tale.

The quotes from Proust are about that unattainable perfection that is long gone and can only be summoned in memory, and this is of course the primary conceit of the tale.

The main character's name, David, and his wife, Ruth, while common enough, are tangentially related in the Bible — Ruth is King David's great grandmother, though that would seem to have little bearing on their relationship, save that she is "an invalid".

Gollum and the One Ring are mentioned, and David believed as a child that if his own eyes were concealed he could walk unseen. The first line does say "leaves in his face".

FUTURE ECHOES: The ambiguous memory/time loop of this story will be seen in a whole lot of future Wolfe — though perhaps not executed as smoothly, this story presages the tale of the jade pillow in *Peace*, the time warping of *A Cabin on the Coast*, the circular repetitions Severian hints at in *New Sun*, and many other plays with memory. *Empires of Foliage and Flower* also plays with the interplay of time's passage and memory, explicitly with movement. Also, the questionable mental state of the character and the use of para-reserpine tables (are those really reserpine, tranquilizers?) will show up in *Three Fingers*! The circular pattern of a story turning in on itself repetitively will occur many times in Wolfe.

Next up is Sonya, Crane Wessleman, and Kittee in *Stories from the Old Hotel*.