

Short Story 48: Peritonitis

The Urth list — 6 messages, 3 voices, 13 Aug 2013

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Marc Aramini — 13 Aug 2013, 20:06

Peritonitis originally appeared in Tomorrow's Alternatives in 1973. It is collected in Endangered Species on page 279.

In this rather straightforward allegory, secondary narrator Greylock tells a story before the "Men of the Neck" are scattered. He is speaking in the time of "my father's mother" according to the actual authorial voice, but the history is highly romanticized: there is an accounting of a golden time when the world "waxed" and people treated each other with respect, when "a virgin might dine at the Calf and drink at the Eyes and sleep where she would and none would harm her". Greylock's story encapsulates the changing ages of the world, including the development of New Mountains which grow to rival the Haunches, until the world begins to wane and seems to be dying. There is talk of strife and antagonism between the different colonies. Ultimately his story culminates in the tale of Deepdelver, whose beloved Singer is washed into the mouth by a Tear on her way to the Eye, and how Deepdelver braves the temptations of the mouth and ingestion to overcome the guardians of those dark places and gain freedom in returning back to the Neck.

COMMENTARY: I think this is perhaps one of Wolfe's simpler allegories, in light of the title. Can we take it literally? Are they really talking about the hair, the mouth, the tongue, and the intestines which are the "Everdark" — the pit of hell to our narrating microorganisms? In this case, I think that is the only explanation, as does the Wolfe-wiki? Our speaker has a sense of history: the body "waxed" once upon a time, though it has only been waning recently. I am fairly certain we can identify our host as a female, with the "new mountains" being developing breasts which eventually give milk: "From the summit of each New Mountain, grown now until they rivaled the Haunches, there broke forth a spring; and the waters of those springs were not clear as the waters of the Eyes are, but white, and sweet." So the external microorganisms have their colonies and roam across the body, and the food and chemistry of the host changes their cyclical temperament as well. "Now this party of young men and maidens were so doing when there came upon them such a calamity as we, of this latter age, have so much more knowledge than they" — I think this implies that the tears that capture Singer and send her to the mouth are much more common after this event - in addition to the "people" understanding the internal systems of the "world". Since these organisms seek out the wet spots like the eyes, it seems likely that they might be gram-negative bacilli. Most skin microbes are antagonistic, which would explain the hostility recounted by Greylock between the different

tribes. It is conceivable that

Deepdelver is a *Corynebacterium*, which would facilitate the growth of other bacteria, or even a yeast. There is a distinct difference between the flora in the skin and the gut, and the presence of Deepdelver down there might act as a catalyst to that gut flora: ?

"How the Inner People won them,

they who then ate what they had from the waters, those unseen ones who never stand in sun, whelming Deepdelver in their myriads; how he their slave taught them to tear the meat they trod and so live lawfully, and how they gave freedom to him, and Singing too, when once they had tasted; how the two made their way midst difficulties and dangers to the Neck again; all these are more than I can say." But you must know the courage and

the history of your People before you fare forth; and I have told you. Field and hill are cold now, and theWorld

itself dying or dead, and the lands are filled with ghouls. It is time you go. This was the last story.

I suppose my final conclusion is that it is in fact

Deepdelver going in through the mouth, avoiding the digestive enzymes lurking temptingly in the water puddles there, overcoming the body's natural defenses and getting to the intestine, where somehow in his bid for freedom he ruptures the peritoneum and starts the infection which will kill the host and ultimately destroy the "world" of our little microorganisms. Can we identify them as bacteria, virus, or other skin dwelling microorganism? It

does seem as if the legend of the dead ones winding up in the hair might make these little things actually part of the body itself, but the other rhetoric suggests that they are microorganisms and microbes living primarily outside the host — and the infiltration of Deepdelver upsets the internal flora enough to produce a life threatening rupture of the peritoneum.

There is talk of God, justice, and a divine plan. More curious is talk of "the wettings came and some perished" — which, as far as I can understand, is showering and bathing with antibacterial soap to keep the germ population down.

Peritonitis is an inflammation of the peritoneum, the thin tissue that lines the inner wall of the abdomen and covers most of the abdominal organs. Peritonitis can result from infection (often due to rupture of a hollow organ as may occur in abdominal trauma or appendicitis) or from a non-infectious process.

I'm going to put this little wiki stub quote on peritoneum

here: "In normal conditions, the peritoneum appears greyish and glistening; it becomes dull 2-4 hours after the onset of peritonitis, initially with scarce serous or slightly turbid fluid. Later on, the exudate becomes creamy and evidently suppurative; in dehydrated patients, it also becomes very inspissated. The quantity of accumulated exudate varies widely. It may be spread to the whole peritoneum, or be walled off by the omentum and viscera.

Inflammation features infiltration by neutrophils with fibrino-purulent exudation." Are the breasts/New

Mountains lactating or is this exudation that Greylock speaks of sign of infection? I incline toward the former

viewpoint, since those folks are clearly on the skin surface.

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS: For me, my recent work on Fifth

Head of Cerberus makes this a clear example of the kind of stuff that Wolfe was up to in "A Story by John V. Marsch". We

have an entire anthropomorphized history and a singing bunch of symbiotic organisms that perhaps ultimately destroy their host but are completely unaware of their actual nature, believing themselves sentient in a world that is living and perhaps divine but not individually human to them (Here, of course, I mean the Shadow Children, which I maintain are small parasites despite their appearance in the story).

Otherwise, the story of Deepdelver takes a mythic stance — much like Orpheus descending into the underworld to retrieve Eurydice, we have someone who braves that depth, but in this case without the tragic ending — at least, according to our teller of the tale. I am fairly certain Deepdelver is at least the start of the rupturing of

the peritoneum that kills the “world”, a female human. The pools of water under the mouth are probably

populated with digestive enzymes that would catch and neutralize Deepdelver if he was convinced to tarry with them — much like the sirens and sea women of old. The conflation of singing with that

feminine identity is interesting, and this “song” is also recapitulated in “A Story by John V. Marsch”, in which the shadow children speak of a song that they sing that is occasionally picked up by other creatures, transformed by them. What does Wolfe intend by this

song? Is it a metaphor for genetic

information/infection/transference/compulsion?

Ultimately the story Peritonitis is a mythic recollection of

a hero and of changing times that ironically facilitate a mass exodus for a culture left with only the memories of “the last story”. It really is just what the title suggests: fatal

infection and the personification of organisms that are very far from human.

Gerry Quinn — 14 Aug 2013, 08:33 · in reply to Marc Aramini

From: Marc Aramini

?How the Inner People won them, they who then ate what they had from the waters, those unseen ones who never stand in sun, whelming Deepdelver in their myriads; how he their slave taught them to tear the meat they trod and so live lawfully, and how they gave freedom to him, and Singing too, when once they had tasted; how the two made their way midst difficulties and dangers to the Neck again; all these are more than I can say. But you must know the courage and the history of your People before you fare forth; and I have told you. Field and hill are cold now, and theWorld itself dying or dead, and the lands are filled with ghouls. It is time you go. This was the last story.

I suppose my final conclusion is that it is in fact Deepdelver going in through the mouth, avoiding the digestive enzymes lurking temptingly in the water puddles there, overcoming the body's natural defenses and getting to the intestine, where somehow in his bid for freedom he ruptures the peritoneum and starts the infection which will kill the host and ultimately destroy the “world” of our little microorganisms. Can we identify them as bacteria, virus, or other skin dwelling microorganism? It does seem as if the legend of the dead ones winding up in the hair might make these little things actually part of the body itself, but the other rhetoric suggests that they are microorganisms and microbes living primarily outside the host — and the infiltration of Deepdelver

upsets the internal flora enough to produce a life threatening rupture of the peritoneum.

The way I read it is they are bacteria and the key words are "how he [] taught them to tear the meat they trod and so live lawfully, and how they gave freedom to him [] when once they had tasted"

What is being described is genetic recombination among bacteria, in which the gut flora receive DNA fragments coding for enzymes which allow them to attack and devour the substrate on which they live. For skin bacteria like *Deepdelper*, the eating of dead skin cells is normal and not pathogenic to the host. When the gut bacteria attack the gut wall, however, it leads to an infection and the death of the host.

Are the breasts/New Mountains lactating or is this exudation that Greylock speaks of sign of infection?

It happened earlier, hence it must be lactation. I think perhaps the host lost a child, but it is hard to be certain. "For when those springs died the New Mountains waned; and the Belly, which had, scarcely noted, waxed above the Loins, withered in one dark. [Paragraph break] Then many felt their doom upon them; this feeling was in the meat, so it was said - but in the air as well."

It does seem to be the case that it was after this event that Singing was captured.

As for the story as a whole, I think we are intended to think of it as two separate interpretations of the same events [the human interpretation is implicit, as the human audience needs less help with that]. The events themselves are fully understood by neither the bacterial narrator nor the host's doctors.

- Gerry Quinn

Lee Berman — 14 Aug 2013, 12:37 · follows Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini: For me, my recent work on *Fifth Head of Cerberus* makes this a clear example of the kind of stuff that Wolfe was up to in "A Story by John V. Marsch". We have an entire anthropomorphized history and a singing bunch of symbiotic organisms that perhaps ultimately destroy their host but are completely unaware of their actual nature.

Great analysis and comparison, Marc. I agree that similar literary principles are at work with *Shadow Children*, along with *Neighbors*, *Inhumi*, *Abaia/undines*, *Tzadkiel/Apheta*, the gods of the Whorl and maybe the gods *Latro* encounters.

We, as humans, take our gender and our individual identity as fixed constants. But that is not going to be the case for non-human characters. What does it mean when we are given the gender and individual name of a bacterium, a *Shadow Child*, an *Abo*, a giant asexual sea monster, an angel, an electronic god or dreamy, plural goat people?

In most Wolfe stories involving non-human characters, we must see gender and naming as conventions which are assigned only as a matter of translation and interpretation for dealings with humans, including us, as readers. (e.g. *Apheta* and *Pig* don't have names until one is needed. The *Green Man* never gets one).

Ostensibly, assigning a name and gender to a budded off piece of a giant sponge is supposed to clarify things for us. But we know Wolfe uses the same principle to confuse his readers too. Part of the enjoyment is trying to figure it all out, I guess.

Gerry Quinn: I think we are intended to think of it as two separate interpretations of the same events [the human interpretation is implicit, as the human audience needs less help with that]. The events themselves are fully understood by neither the bacterial narrator nor the host's doctors.

I agree. The doctors in this story are (supposedly) vastly superior beings to infectious bacteria. But the doctors would be more effective in their treatment if they knew what Greylock knew.

I think there is a similar dynamic between Tzadkiel and Severian. The angel is a being orders of magnitude superior to humans. Yet there are some aspects to Severian which he/she is unable to understand or duplicate. The deference Tzadkiel shows Severian is surprising. But in the context of the whole story and the body of Wolfe's work, it makes sense.

Marc Aramini — 14 Aug 2013, 13:12 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Gerry wrote : It happened earlier, hence it must be lactation. I think perhaps the host lost a child, but it is hard to be certain.

Yes I got the impression that the tears were way more common after Singer was captured- I agree with that feeling. Depression might have made her more susceptible to a simple bacterial infection as well. I agree - bacteria and a lost child.

Marc Aramini — 14 Aug 2013, 13:14 · in reply to Marc Aramini

How much harder would this story have been if Wolfe had named it "Deepdelper and the Everdark" or "Greylock's Last Story"? I feel like in the 90s he might not have given us the interpretive friendly title.

Marc Aramini — 14 Aug 2013, 14:20 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee wrote: I agree that similar literary principles are atwork with Shadow Children, along with Neighbors, Inhumani, Abaia/undines, Tzadkiel/Apheta, the gods of the Whorl and maybe the gods Latro encounters. We, as humans, take our gender and our individual identity as fixed constants. But that is not going to be the case for non-human characters. What does it mean when we are given the gender and individual name of a bacterium, a Shadow Child, an Abo, a giant asexual sea monster, an angel, an electronic god or dreamy, plural goat people?

One more thing that just struck me is the nature of this self referential myth making - Deepdelper is a hero from his perspective and the point of view of his fellows, but his success pretty much doomed everybody. Saving one bacterium cost them the world itself. Silk and Severian have these moments too- Severian makes it pretty clear with his rhetoric even before Urth of the New Sun that he intends people to regard him as autarch and new sun, but his "heroic" effort pretty much destroys the world. Silk sets up the exodus and then retreats for one woman, and everyone outside the whorl laments at how terrible things have gotten in his absence. Can this salvation save them from what they truly are?

Interesting position for heroes to be in - almost accomplishing as much degenerate bad as master villains, while villains like Typhon become more like stewards than one would suppose. This is part of why Wolfe's writing informed by religion is so much more interesting than a whole lot of other religious work.