

Short Stories 54-57: The Dark of the June, The Death of Hyle, From the Notebook of Dr. Stein, and Thag

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Marc Aramini — 12 Nov 2013, 03:20

The Dark of the June,

The Death of Hyle, From the Notebook of Dr. Stein, Thag

This series of interlinked stories appeared in 1974 and 1975

in Continuum 1-3 and 5. It is at this

point in Wolfe's career that the Borgesian/metafictional play in the stories becomes strongest, making the stories of the mid 1970s and 1980s a bit more obfuscating on the surface, though in these particular stories it is still clear "what happens", it is less than clear if they are intended to be entirely artificial such as "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story."

BRIEF SUMMARY: In 1997, Harry Boyce Nailer, a one-eyed

academic, has long ago lost his wife, May, and his daughter June has decided to

take an exit to everyday life that has become available thanks to the psychic

sensitivity of Laurel Baker (associated with a lantern lighting the way). This escape from nature classifies those who

take it as nin (not in nature) and seems to involve some "bounce" between reality and some other state of existence without a corporeal form, described as a gain in potential energy the longer one has lived, thus making the

"bounce" from high to low energy more extreme. He tries to intervene by going to the office on a long automated

walkway, but he is too late. He manages

to break past the security long enough to speak to the 3V image of his

daughter, who is at home. He beats up

the two policemen and escapes, to ask his daughter why she is leaving and to

reveal his fear of her dying, and his own gladness over the fact that he will

never have to see her die. She winks

out, her jewelry falling, after explaining that she doesn't want to see him die

and wants to flee his expectations.

"In ?The Death of Hyle",

Harry becomes our first person narrator and speculates on the nature of the

world, his eyes tricked by illusion, though he denies that he is a religious

person. He has made himself young with

implants and surgery, and succeeds in going through with the discarnation, an

operation involving drugs and a procedure which may exist purely to compel

belief. His body flashes off into the

sky, passing through a tree, but does come back. He imagines himself walking into the sky and

throwing his own shark like face back at himself, from which he flees, before

meeting a woman tied to a lantern, Laurel Baker, who helps him find June in his

own navel, being led by a creature in scarlet and gold. The three return to his house, where

June

appears to only cry and moan of her fear of incarceration before disappearing. In "The Notebook of Dr. Stein", an alienist interviews the possessed Donna W., who explains what has happened in the future with disincarnation and the existence of the creature Thag, who is trying to use her as an energy base. When Dr. Stein uses electroshock treatment on her, Donna dies.

In the fairy tale "Thag", the boy Eric has a bear skull made by his great-grandfather "choking the bear with moonlight and filling his skull with the cottony tales of rabbits, and the urine of shadows, and black feathers snatched at great risk from the left foreleg of an eagle — The bear's skull was the home of Thag, as a beehive is the home of bees". Thag returns to the skull and Eric uses him

to take the kingdom of Charles the Wise and his dim wife. After 30 years of fairy tale time, eventually

Laurel Baker, Harry Nailer, and June show up, and he mistakes them for Frigg, Odin, and Freya respectively. Thag

approaches as a headless bear waiting to be killed by Nailer, but he decides to pin him to the floor with his spear instead, and charges Eric to never let him go. Eric lives happily ever after.

ANALYSIS OF VARIOUS DETAILS:

? THE ROOM: The actual

room is described as if it jumped from the pages of a newspaper unchanged since May's planning. Those who are nin (Not in Nature) return to the flat pages of an ancient story, so it is perhaps not unusual to begin with this: real life springing from the pages of a book, then jumping outside itself in a kind of potential/kinetic energy based on the amount of time the human in question has lived, ultimately returning to a low level energy state in a fairy tale.

However, Wolfe's sensibilities in the mid-1970s are flirting with the postmodern just a bit more, and it seems that in the span of these four stories we have a good range of fictional mimesis, from representational science fiction rooted in psychological realism to a directly mythical piece. Is the entire series metafiction, aware of its own artificiality? We will address this soon.

The state of Harry Nailer's room is "Untouched by any change of the last twenty five years, the Nailer living room continued to reflect (like a lost photograph unexpectedly found between the pages of a book) the tastes of Henry's late wife, May Nailer — just such a room as May might have seen in a newspaper the day she ordered the furniture."

METAFICTION: The story is set in 1997, and the room hasn't changed in 25 years, and that line might very well have been penned toward the end of 1972 or 1973, since the story was published in 1974, as the room really does become unchanging once its description is penned.

At the beginning of "The Dark of the June", Henry Boyce

Nailer sits reading "An Incident at Krechetovka Station" by Solzhenitsyn. In "Thag?", which is clearly intended to be a

"fairy story", Harry Nailer asks, "Do the characters in the books you have here ever read themselves" — In our world, you see, it would be quite possible for a character in a book to sit peacefully before his fire reading the short stories of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. (At this

point Thag appears in the form of a headless bear — more on the bear head soon). I do believe that this is an

important bit of detail: Harry Nailer has admitted through this detail that his actions at the start, reading a book, are entirely possible in a story (as they

are in a story). The room at the start could have jumped from still pages because, of course, it has. The story also plays with the relationships

between symbolic and mythic characters and “real” characters, and I believe high and low energy states here simply resonate with the audience of fiction as time passes, but when they are no longer read, their existence in the minds of others “asymptotically approaches zero”.

More on this mysterious resonance is possible when we consider the second story, “The Death of Hyle”:

“There is something that I think must be defined, and that is the curious relationship to Hyle and wood.

HYLE: ?refers to matter or stuff. It can also be the material cause underlying a change in Aristotelian philosophy. The Greeks originally had no word for matter in general, as opposed to raw material suitable for some specific purpose or other, so Aristotle adapted the word for “wood” to this purpose. The idea that everything physical is made of the same basic substance holds up well under modern science, although it may be thought of more in terms of energy or matter/energy.”

This idea is philosophically important, especially in light of the strange resonance between change, matter, and wood. Also in this story, we get the rather strange

ability of wood to communicate, and trees also seem to be the transitional state through which Nailer travels (though this is complicated by reference to Madagascar — hmmm).

Wood of course does ultimately make the paper that seems to be the lowest energy level that these ideas can attain approaching immortality, so that the final words can come true, living “Happily, Ever, After.”

CLOTHING: The clothing of the 1990s of the story, emphasized by June’s diaphanous gown and neon jewelry, is extremely exposed; even bare breasts are not taboo. This style seems consistent with the revealing, wild wardrobe of his other near future dystopias of the early 70s like “Remembrance to Come.”

THE CHARACTERS AND REFERENCES:

HENRY BOYCE NAILER/WODEN: He makes himself artificially young to disincarnate with his daughter, but when he actually finds her, it is inside himself. There is an odd scene where his own cruel, sharklike face is thrown at him, from which he flees. He is left handed like Gene Wolfe, and

decides not to kill Thag, but nails him to the floor with his spear, trusting Eric to keep him and use his powers to his own advantage. He becomes his name, a hairy nailer.

JUNE NAILER/FREYJA: June claims that she is leaving so that she would never see her father dead, and “All you expected of me, a little.

And?”? She is cut off before giving her final reason, but her jewelry bounces to the ground — Nailer “saw the twinkle of her bracelet and earring under the willow; then the little lights winked out one by one,” ending our first tale. In Norse mythology Freya cries tears of red and gold for her husband, Or. There is some conflation between Odin/Wotan and Or, and between Freya and Frigg, which is ultimately confusing. Both Freya and Frigg exchange sexual favors

for jewelry, perhaps echoing the fall of the jewelry and her unfinished “and” at the end of the first story.

LAUREL BAKER/FRIGG: "The name Laurel is associated with the laurel tree." She is associated with Frigg in the final story, with her dark hair and the white swath, and carries a lantern in the "between" world. Frigg is Odin's wife, but oddly enough, it is unclear whether Freya and Frigg stem from a common goddess. She was a medium who was one of the first to cross over and disincarnate.

Dr. STEIN: He identifies Thag's movements as those of a bat, but there is a slight anachronism here. Cerletti and Bini will first use ECT on a human in 1938, and Dr. Stein

here insists that it is 1935. In

addition, he mentions Dr. Huer of Buck Rogers, and this at least would be possible, as he was first published in 1928.

ERIC: In Nine Men's Meadows, Eric uses Thag as his father

before him did. Nine is a special number

in Norse mythology, relating to the worlds across Yggdrasil and several other mysteries. Eric is a very common name in

Norse stories.

GNIP, ERIC'S RAVEN: it is possible that his name merely

means to nip at something, but when Thag shows up again, Gnip proclaims mystery. It seems that in light of all

the other Norse references here, we should mention Gnipa, the cave that gives entrance to the underworld or world of the dead governed by Hel, where Garm howls chained, waiting for Ragnarok.

CHARLES THE WISE — the king with his "womanly" but vapid

queen and son Prince Robert, who seems to have little to do with either the Holy Roman Charles or the French one.

THAG: WHAT IS THAG?: Could he be Freyja's red and golden

tears at the loss of her desire? In light of the despair in the young of the 1997 setting, who feel they must escape nature somehow, even though it means that they are to all intents and purposes dead to those they leave behind, the central mystery is of the identity of Thag — who, when he appears as a man, wears scarlet and gold. In light of June's

eventual association with Freya in the final story, we should consider this:

"indeed I saw her over the woman's shoulder, led by a tall, swaggering being of scarlet and gold — and then we three — but not the man in scarlet and gold — were standing beside the furnace in the basement of our own house." But June .. would only cry, and tell us that

her father the king would allow no one to mock her, and scream for fear the old man in the picture above the mantel would imprison her in the Piombi with Casanova. — "She has broken; we all break to some extent, and you have brought the wrong fragment." (The man over the mantel is the Doge of Venice, Lorenzo Loredano, who lived more than a hundred years before Casanova, who is famous for his escape from the Piombi as well as womanizing.)

Later (in 1935), the possessed Donna W. responds that there

are "three unless you count the other one" inside her, to which our doctor formulates "you wish me to believe you have multiple personalities." "In both of these scenarios Thag is present but

the count of individuals is still presented as three.

This telling scene resonates with not only Norse but

Christian symbolism: Frigg whispered to Freya, "There has to be a world that corresponds to each of our fictions, dear, since what never was nor will be is inconceivable." Still, I wonder what Thag really is. And the bear became a snake pinned by the tail and struck an inch short of her heel. The serpent is of course the biblical serpent here, forever aiming at the feet of womankind, who will try to trample it, but it is indicative of that original sin, and I think in some small part this Thag that leads June is a part of her, The Dark of the Moon, that stains her life and is the unfinished and reason for her departure and disincarnation from life, though later she mentions Casanova and the red and gold tears of Freya are for a lover who is always gone in Or. Thag wishes to be killed here so that he can escape elsewhere or elsewhen, but Nailer decides to trap him instead in this fairy tale.

In "From the Notebook of Dr. Stein", it is speculated that "He may be a creature from a different sphere, or a spiritual survivor of a prehuman race" and he exhibits bat like movements, but he doesn't seem large or menacing enough to be the Midgard Serpent — the Christian one seems more appropriate, though something is still missing there.

While in 1935 it is clear Dr. Stein believes that the problem might be internal to Donna, it seems to me that this is a conceivable solution for Thag's presence — a girl's shattered psyche — but not this girl's. The problem is in June's grief: seeking to escape life, this thing leading her, echoing the scarlet and gold tears of Freya, might indeed be a part of her instead of Donna. Why? has June latched onto this thing, that reaches into the past to feed off of agitated energy states?

THE DARK OF THE MOON: Astrology and the Moon are associated with the triple goddess, mother,

maiden, and crone. The relationship

between Frigg and Freyja, Aesir and Vanir, is interesting in that they are counterparts but it isn't clear if they are one and the same or distinct deities, so they may make up a component of the triple goddess. The dark of the moon symbolizes its absence

from the night sky, death before renewal. For though the text insists that escaping nature frees them from death

and age, eventually they simply reach that "zero" energy level.

Molly Hall's essay "The Dark Moon" identifies this time as "Also known as the "dead" Moon, this is the time when there is no solar reflection, leaving the lunar face in darkness. The dark lasts about three days before the new crescent appears."

She also states, "The dark of the Moon is the most powerful time psychically" and represents extreme introspection. This is also related to the monthly cycle of a woman in menstruation, and it is no coincidence that the females in Harry Nailer's life are named after successive months: May and June. Grief and death and cyclical renewal are implied in the dark moon phase. —

As Hall writes, "In our own lives, there's a dark Moon phase toward the end as we prepare to enter the mystery of death. . . a separate plane where the dead and almost born are together. The Moon is associated with women, and many Goddesses like Hecate, Kali, Lilith, represent her dark aspect. The dark Moon reminds us of nature's cycles of death and rebirth. The grave and the womb become the same place, a transition when you're held in the mystery beyond

physical existence.”

The triple nature of Hecate and the presence of Freya and Frigg in our story summon up that moon imagery as well, but one female is missing — maiden, mother, and crone — which one? June does seem to be the maiden to some degree.

MYTH, FICTION, AND HUMANITY:

While these four interlocked stories do seem to take a slightly different approach to genre, with one being a sad memoir of loss, one a physician’s journal, and the last a fairy tale, I think that the overall theme is metafictional: that outside of nature, the immortality of men and women is found in memory and in stories, whether they be mythic or realistic, but that in that form, identity becomes malleable, such that a character like Harry Nailer can be created with Odin like features, knowing that Odin might very well be based on the features of a real man somewhere in history, such that these stories echo. I do think that the bounce referenced as potential vs. kinetic energy like a ball descending to a lower energy state is “really” about relevance and obscurity in memory — stories that are read, that have greater presence, take longer to be forgotten and can impact the world of the living. Living things change, the written word is more or less immutable — thus

“The Death of Hyle” — matter, change, and wood — when it is killed, that wood might very well be used to print things, even to print the newspaper that inspired Harry Nailer’s immutable room.

Nailer describes his eyes as enchained by Maya, and specifically gives a time frame of four thousand years for this illusory understanding of reality on the part of humanity. Maya at one time meant wisdom and extraordinary power, but “the word came to mean illusion, fraud, deception, witchcraft, sorcery and magic.” I really

want to spend a fair amount of time on Nailer’s description of his world after he leaves nature: “I am tempted by the rooted course of our language to say that I had the feeling then that the room around me, tole box, pencil, the brass inkstand with its devil face, desk chairs, books, walls, my bronze bust of Hogarth, had become unreal as the angel faces seen in the clouds. — I knew that I had lived my life among the shadow of shadows, that I had worked for money as I might have labored for fernseed, and spent my gains for the watermarks on paper, paper in a picture, the picture in a book seen lying open in a projection from a lens about to crack in an empty room of a vacant house.”

Here we have representations of devils and angels that are ultimately just as real (or false) as the world of Harry Nailer, and his entire world here becomes overtly PAPER - and all his life written on that canvas. This brings us back to the title: “The Death of Hyle” — all that matter, written on dead wood and artificial in nature. He claims that objective reality is just a fiction, “the creature of the very radiation by which we gauge it”

THE TREES: There is something odd about the trees in this one, too: “I ducked and ran, lost at once until I met a tall, self contained personage who was a tree, though I did not realize it until I had been with him for some time.” After his little disincarnation, “When I was coming up my own front walk — the whole world began to rise, pivoting (I think) on Madagascr so that I fell off the surface and was caught for a moment in the green arms of a neighbor’s tree, and then, falling

through them like rain, but upward, tumbled sideways into the sky.” I do feel like this mystical association

between hyle, wood, and paper as the fabric of reality is the dominant motif of the stories. In the fairy tale, Thag

allowed Eric’s father to make “the trees to dance down the high road, and built a great hall of glass on Nine Men’s Meadow through whose dome the stars could be seen by daylight, and forced certain rich men in the town to disgorge a part of what they had won by law”.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: Is there something a bit — unnatural

about the relationship between Harry Nailer and his daughter June? There is the scene where he imagines the girl

on the beltway, “he imagined himself escorting a much younger woman into a restaurant — they would be father and daughter until the other diners saw their hands clasped beneath the table”. Is this the reason their relationship seems a bit strained? What did he expect of her, and

why is she so broken? Sexual abuse?

Why is Madagascar the pivot point? Does it have something to do with its large percentage of unique life, isolated from other natural creatures?

Is there a relationship between the 30 years Thag spends in

the realm of Charles the Wise during which Eric doesn’t age and the 30 year age

limit on those subjected to the nin treatment??? Is there any importance to the statement “we, every one of us, feel

crushed beneath the dictum that one thousand less nine hundred thirty is seventy, and tortured by the implacable commandment to destroy the thing we love, while the solid fact (as we call it) that Madagascar is off the eastern coast of Africa affects us not at all.” 9 is important to the Norse mythology, and 30 the duration of time Thag stays in the past before he finds him, and the arbitrary age limit of those who can disincorporate — why subtract 930 from 1000? Has he destroyed the thing he

loves in June and May?

What does Laurel mean when she says that June is broken and that Harry has “brought the wrong fragment?”

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS: Wolfe’s rather dystopian “close to realistic stories” of the early 70s resonate strongly with this one,

especially those that involve radical clothing styles with excessively exposed

flesh such as “Remembrance to Come”. While I am less confident in ascribing this cycle of stories to the

timeline of “Blue Mouse”, “Silhouette”, “Remembrance to Come”, “Sonya, Crane Wessleman, and Kitty”, “Paul’s Treehouse”, and “Operation Ares”, I still feel

that there is some relationship between many of these stories that is more than thematic (the phonetic voirsriit technology mentioned in “Blue Mouse” and

“Sillhouette”, for example, or the riots from “Paul’s Treehouse” possibly

having a more overt description of who was actually rioting in Operation Ares). The need to become other than we are is

reflected from the other side in “The Hero as Werwolf”.

Despite the ambiguity in Fifth

Head of Cerberus or the ending of “The HORRARS of War”, both of which I

found to be ultimately “scrutable” through the application of symbolic

meanings, this work seems to hang much more ambiguously between metafiction and

realistic science fiction, when the text seems to be saying that ALL reality is

text, that mythic characters are based on real ones, and real ones based on

mythic ones, and that immortality might involve fleeing into a subjective text

or tale — and that reality itself might be just one of those tales from a perception beyond our own.