

Peace writeup part 1

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Marc Aramini — 17 Apr 2014, 06:22

Motifs in Gene Wolfe's Peace: Fairy Tales from the Emerald Isle, Cultural Displacements, and the Resurrection Egg

Marc Aramini

????Gene Wolfe's work has summoned diverse responses, from those who claim that he is the greatest writer of our time in or out of genre to those who insist that "there is nothing to get" besides the surface. While many extol the virtues of close readings and attention to detail in Wolfe, the various critical approaches to Wolfe are at times unsatisfying — either so conservative that they explain nothing or so whimsically ungrounded in the text that they tell us more about the critic than Wolfe's work. Peace (1975) is one of those unusual works in Wolfe's corpus: we can all agree on the implied condition of our narrator, marginally unstated but implied through the pattern of stories tinged with ghosts and flirting with both the supernal and the hellish, but as in all Wolfe, we must ask what other details of the primary text can be inferred from all these stories told in parallel? Luckily, Peace has generated a consensus of interpretation, but it is still useful for learning some of Wolfe's characteristic methods of encryption — methods which can be applied fruitfully to his other, more interpretationally divisive, works. This essay is intended as both a specific analysis of Peace's patterns and a statement on the strategies Wolfe employs through all his work to generate conclusive meanings even when closure is not directly explicated.

READING STRATEGIES FOR WOLFE

????First, the general strategy for reading Wolfe which I always consider involves understanding that he is a prose symbolist. The difference between Wolfe and other famous symbolists may be found in the fact that his texts, while at times poetic, are grounded in discernible rules of theme — those forged intuitive symbols are created through pattern and repetition, and nowhere is this more apparent than in his novel Peace. Wolfe is esoteric in that he is a blatant spiritualist: just because cause and effect are not explained, they are often structurally implied through either pattern repetition or juxtaposition. A holistic look at the text is necessary to determine these patterns.

In addition to being an engineer by training, which often emphasizes cause, effect, and reproducibility as well as careful planning, Wolfe is spiritually inclined. The spiritual world is perceptually certainly more abstract than engineering principles, and therein lies the challenge of reading Wolfe: he is equally likely to pin a conclusion on applying some scientific or organizational principle as he is to summon up religious symbol and ceremony. Absence is as important as presence in Wolfe's fiction: God is objectively absent from every factual scientific development, from reality, from our external senses, but that doesn't imply He isn't lurking hidden behind everything, in every grain of sand, in every whisper of love, the primary observer and the structure that makes everything possible and gives everything meaning. Wolfe patterns his fiction on this: what is elided might even be the most important part: it is the organizing principal. Another

guiding principal of his fiction is that WE DO NOT KNOW OURSELVES FULLY. Peace is no exception: told by an engineer who becomes president of a juice making plant trying to find spiritual solace and meaning, our narrator refuses to examine in depth the worst sins on his conscience (in this struggle, akin to the one between the fairy cat and the wicked king of the

rats in St. Brandon's story, little pieces keep breaking off and running into the woods, and one cannot help but feel that Weer's memory operates in the same way — portions and parts fragment off and are lost from his conscious recollection) as his story recapitulates the quote from the rather metafictional *Marvell's of Science*:

Hell is a country of marshes — and that no two devils are of the same shape and appearance, some having limbs too many, some limbs too few, others with limbs misplaced or with the heads of animals, or having no faces, or faces like those long dead or the faces of those whom they hate so that when they see themselves reflected they detest the image. But that all of them believe themselves handsome and, at least compared to others, good. And that murderers and their victims, if they were both evil, become at death one devil. (256).

We shall return to this rather vital quote to discuss the fate of Olivia Weer as well as the carnival Cinderella — for in that story, we see individuals “with limbs misplaced” (Mrs. Turner), “limbs too few” (the carnival owner without legs who drives the car), the dog boy with a hairy face Charles Turner, and EVERYONE in the pictures from the carnival having “faces like those long dead”, as Weer observes with his secretary at the end of the novel. Yet what can this mean in light of the fairly clear placement of the carnival scenes in the frame narrative? The real relationship between the carnival and Weer's life at first seems second hand, as the necessary lines of connection seem absent.

Let's examine another concrete example of absence: the story Julius Smart tells of Mr. Tilly in the third section highlights that the solution to a story puzzle may involve some outside bit of cultural or literary information: the speaker, Mr. Smart (whose story will be retold by Weer to Margeret Lorn at a picnic that reeks of carnal intention) recounts an event that occurs at the Bluebird Diner with his new benefactor. At this dinner, Mr. Tilly switches meals with his new employee, Julius Smart — later it is revealed that his paranoia over being slowly “poisoned” with a lithomorphic drug by a ghost or revenant prompts this switch. However, Smart sets up the story as a game, challenging his audience to name the one thing that Mr. Tilly did not eat from his own order. In typical Wolfe fashion, the food item is not named in Smart's order — the audience just has to know that everything in the south would come with Hominy Grits, including Smart's meal, though Mr. Tilly actually orders them. This absence, in the form of a culturally supplied bit of extra information to solve the puzzle presented to the audience, is the solution to that particular mystery, and though it is provided eventually, this is a clear meta-narrative training for Peace as a whole, where what is left out but implied by reference, culture, or pattern is actually the solution to a problem rather clearly posed by the text.

The novel is a collection of ghost stories, fairy tales, and Irish folktales juxtaposed with the memoirs of Weer, and it is quite clear that all of these embedded stories can cast interpretive light on the frame tale. Sometimes these frame tales are very clear: the princess with her suitors named Elaia, the greek for Olive, is a direct parallel with Olivia's story dealing with Peacock, Blaine, McAfee, and Smart, and the story of the Marid named Naranj (naranjo is an orange) who makes ben Yahya (son of John) work for him for 30 years (approximately the same amount of time Weer, son of John, works for the Orange magnate Julius Smart) before setting him free to the haunted land are clear parallels with Weer's life (however, in the embedded story ben Yahya lusts after a dark haired beauty with a lyre — this evokes his own Aunt Olivia with her harp and raven hair far more than the young Margeret Lorn, whom he comes to pine for at Olivia's wedding). The

story of St. Brandon, with its cat, dog, rat, and boat that is partially wooden and partially stone, with a mast that parallels a princess' tower, might have a more difficult relationship to the text, though Weer does imagine Margeret Lorn in a tower at his Aunt's wedding, when she wears green.

As I said, Wolfe often writes with absence foremost in his mind, but there is still a guiding principal that can be discerned by piecing together his symbols, his clues, and his syncretism. Wolfe has mastered structure through absence, where at times the didactic or symbolic meaning is clear but the real practical application is entirely opaque and difficult to discern. All of these fairy tales and the narrative stance of Weer indicates that somehow this small town

rural American life going through the throes of extreme modernization is a fairy story, with the immigrants and characters actually becoming the sidhe, firbolg, and mythic creatures to a glimpsed but off screen future. In addition, the background story of Blaine's dealing with the Indians links the cultural displacement of the Gaelic cultures here in America with the displaced Native Americans and the older fairy stories of cultural strife, hinting at a time when humanity itself will be

displaced by something else, until humanity is just a story that lingers long after its passing, like Weer and Peace.

IDENTITY

????Wolfe's stories, while different in plot, style, and even structure, often rely on the idea of identity — in earlier works such as "Trip, Trap", the subjective understanding of each individual was too incomplete to encompass the external "truth" — but through empathy and cooperation, that truth became increasingly objective (even if it wasn't in the "real world" but rather in a spiritual one). Weer is no different — the house in which he walks, with its changing hallways and lost rooms, clearly mirrors the story of the lich encountered at the end of chapter 4:

The flesh of his head was as dust, and there remained only his hair ? [which] had in it certain of those small animals which the sun engenders in that which no longer has life His eyes were no more their sockets seemed dark pits save that there flickered behind them a point of light that moved from one to the other and often as gone from both, and appeared just such a spark as is seen at night when the wind blows a fire that is almost gone, and perhaps a single spark, burning red, flies hither and thither in the black air. — I knew this spark for the soul of the dead man, seeking in all the chambers under the vault of the skull its old resting places. (281)

???? Yet the only thing the undead creature can say is "O shades of the unborn years, depart from me, and trouble not the day that is mine." (282) Constantly in his thoughts, Weer has moved from one time to another, from story to story and age to age, seeking his old resting places, and the fire that he stokes resonates with that weak fire of the soul flickering inside this dead man's skull. This feature of Peace is well accepted, and proof is just as easy to establish, but once again it is blurred by identity puzzles, the game that Wolfe enjoys most. This time Wolfe himself has given away the game in interviews — we shall gloss over the well known fact that the opening line, "The elm tree planted by Eleanor Bold, the judge's daughter fell last night — I woke — I was sitting up in my bed before the fire- but by the time I was awake there was nothing to hear but the dripping of the melting snow running from the eaves" (9). Of course later we learn that Mrs. Porter wants to plant a tree on Weer's grave. "That's her hobby: she plants trees of endangered American species on the graves of her friends — She was a close friend of my aunt's when I was a boy. She was a beautiful woman then, a blonde" (250). Eleanor Bold of courses flirts with the Porter boy to get information about the egg Aunt Olivia is buying, and is described as a beautiful girl in blond braids at Weer's fifth birthday party — and elm's are endangered by dutch elm disease. This is well established from Wolfe's own interviews and from Damien Broderick's thoughts on Peace; Weer is dead, and the pattern of ghosts repeated in the stories, even down to ben Yahya being deposited at the haunted city to find his love at the end, speak of this ultimate fate: a kind of death. On re-reading Peace the first time the theme of ghosts, hauntings, and regrets rather jumps out, but there are several other patterns

that may hint at a rather interesting world view, where the transformation of matter from living to dead is accompanied by some form of ultimate spiritual transmogrification that harkens to the fairy stories referenced so often throughout the novel. Of course identifying Mrs. Porter as Eleanor Bold illustrates the point that the key to many of the mysteries is identity. There are other characters such as Charles Turner and Dorris Mason, ultimately of questionable parenthood — what then can we make of them? Can they be identified fruitfully?

IRISH FAIRY TALES AND THE PEOPLE OF PEACE

????Besides these ghostly "afterlife" themes, there are several other things we should note — for an American story, the family names listed are overwhelmingly Scottish or Irish, as can be

clearly seen in the appendix to this article. Obviously the early Gaelic stories told by Kate Boyne and Hannah are spoken again through Weer, the fairy tales of that land involving the Sidhe and the Firbolg — but it seems that these characters in the frame tale resonate with the displaced history of those fey Gaelic creatures, perhaps even becoming exactly like them, transformed through death into the fairy tales mentioned so often and even echoing the displacement of the Native Americans, as the deer skin treaty forged by Olivia and her friends at Den's fifth birthday party indicates. Most fascinatingly, the sidhe mentioned in the final story told by the Doherty's descendant Dan French survive in the transformed shapes of a flock of geese even long after they should be dead. The relationship between the sidhe, the lesser fairies, the Firbolg, and the Tuatha Da Danann is one of displacement and eventual replacement, and this too seems to be in the backdrop of Peace: Weer's memories have become magical to whatever lives on earth after man's time is done. He laments what could have been in different circumstances when his knife starts a strange chain of associations:

so will I search for my knife — It was large .. the scales were of simulated black staghorn, bringing to mind (at least to mine) the image of a simulated stag, his horns held proudly as those of any elm-deer, ranging the forest among the now waking trees, trees whose leaves are dying with the summer in every color, like bruises, but bruises beautiful as the skins of races unborn, withheld from us because God, or destiny, or the bland chance of the scientists — has denied us the sight of all these scarlet and yellow — truly red, orange, russet brown — races on our sidewalks — the scarlet people with tight fists and loose women .. the orange people with their weird religion demanding the worship of sundials (as our own seems to others that of telephone poles) — only the rarest, the russet browns, belong here, native to St. Brendan's land, and they are dying. (27- 28)

???? This rumination of the possible people surely seems to resemble at the end the fate of many Native American tribes. Weer even goes on immediately to think of how the imitation hunter would leave his simulated stag dead to be devoured by foxes, as prize without eating the meat. Is this a science fictional imagining? Even his ruminations with Lois Arbuthnot touch on this theme of being the last of your kind: 'I think being the last human being is more important. Have you ever wondered how the last dinosaur felt? Or the last Passenger pigeon.' 'Are you the last human being? I hadn't noticed.' 'You were talking about the Indians — how do you think the last Indian felt?'' (214-215). This is a strange conjunction of extinction, birds, and the feeling of being the last of an oppressed people.

???? The concluding fairy tale is one of the most important, in which the sidhe, the makers of the fairies, are sad at the passing of their time and try to expand it unnaturally through transformation into a communal flock of geese so that as long as one survives, a slightly altered story of the Tuatha Da Danann story of the Children of Lir. In the section below, we will look at how this mirrors the transformations found in Lang's Green Fairy Book, explicitly mentioned several times in the text and a gift at Weer's Christmas encounter at his grandfather's house (also where the Simurg is mentioned — more of this in the section concerning birds below). The culminating story of the flock of geese and the sidhe also reflects at least one character's family name. The name McAfee, the man who actually winds up with the resurrection egg, has a name which is an offshoot of Mac Dubhshithe, which means the black one of peace. One branch of the family, known as Dubh-sidh, has a name which implies black fairy. These sidhe, the people of the mound, are also often called the people of Peace, and their prominence in the book is no coincidence. Even the memorable banshee, or bean sidhe (woman of the fairy mounds), from the story of Molly and Jack told by Kate to Hannah and by Hannah to Weer, resonates with this overarching presence of the sidhe. The egg and the green pillow seem to be the symbols of redemption and resurrection, though whether they are sinister or not is once again less than clear.

???? What is clear is the thematic repetition of a people's displacement, the conflict between the firbolg, the sidhe, the fairies, and the normal people, continues:

And is if by magic — and it may have been magic, for I believe America is the land of magic, and that we, we now past Americans, were once the magical people of it, waiting now to stand

to some unguessable generation of the future — to flit piping through groves ungrown, our women ready to haunt as lamiae the rose-red ruins of Chicago and Indianapolis that are little more than earthen mounds, when the heads of the trees are higher than the hundred and twenty fifth floor ? it seemed to me that I found myself in bed again, the old house swaying in silence as though it were moored to the universe by only the thread of smoke from the stove. (38)

Notice here that our cities have become but earthen mounds to that unguessable future, a time when Weer's burial tree has grown immensely, and humanity become the people of the forgotten mounds, a literal sidhe.

THE APPLE OF MORTALITY

????Another repeating motif that begins with the very opening scene involves the apple — and in this case it seems to signify both mortality and the fall of man simultaneously. Weer's long dead uncle Joe, his father's older brother, who died as a child, is depicted on a portrait, stored with apples, so that he “smells of apples, from having been stored so long with them” (15). The fall down the stairs that contributes to Bobby Black's convalescence and death is provoked by apples as well under the gaze of this portrait, with its background, a Tuscan garden, that to early Weer seems the setting of Lang's Green Fairy Book, as Weer ruminates that the background of the portrait were real and America the fiction. Bobby attempts to “throw apples that, striking the walls, will break, spattering picture and floor with crisp, fragrant, tart fragments and these in turn, eventually, become brown, dirty, and sour — and I blamed, for it is impossible, unthinkable, that I should clean the floor”, and this incites the wrestling match which leads to the fall of Bobby and Weer (17).

????This is not the only mention of apples in the text dealing with corruption. A rather innocuous mention occurs when Doherty tells the mysterious story of Finn M'Cool at Tara while he is sitting on an empty apple barrel. Weer tests the fake copy of *The Lusty Lawyer* to see if it smells of apples like the portrait of Joe (Mab makes apple pie) but most tellingly when Weer succumbs to Sherry Gold's offers “her young hair was so fragrant that I might have been thrusting my face among the boughs of a blossoming apple tree” (265). The apple of discord is mentioned as the object which the fake Venus de Milo was holding in her hands, the one offered to her by Paris because “possibly her carver hoped for some confusion with Eve?(275). Twice in the story of the carnival apples are mentioned — once when Dorris is forbidden a hamburger or candy apple at the stand by her step mother, and again when Charles Turner tries to get the giant Tom

interested in Doris ?I bought him — you know — a hamburger or a taffy apple or something and tried to get Doris to talk — it's about time he started getting interested because who the hell could stand having a fairy that was seven foot six around?” (288). The final appearance of the apple also mentions fairies of a different sort (though is that description a coincidence?): “I thee baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” and when he had said these words there stood Deirdre and her two brothers but time had had his way with them, and they were bent now and old, and though their cheeks were red as apples, their hair was white as frost, for they had far outlived their time. (315).

Corruption, death, the fall of man from a state of innocence that parallels the story of eating the fruit of knowledge and good and evil, leading to his ultimate mortality: all these things are recapitulated in the apple's presence in *Peace*.

BIRDS, RESURRECTION, AND THE GREEN FAIRY BOOK

Wolfe does not only make cultural and religious references — many of his allusions are to existing literature, especially when they are explicitly mentioned by title in the text. The *Green Fairy Book* by Lang Weer gets for Christmas at his grandfather's is interesting in that many of the stories in that text involve the transformation of men or other creatures into birds, be it King Charming transformed to a blue bird, the caliph and his vizier to storks, three helpful dogs into birds, or stories of magical birds such as the Magic Swan, the curative Golden Blackbird, or even having a “half” chicken with one working side as the main character in a lesson about helping others ... Looking through *Peace* again the metaphors for birds are ubiquitous, especially

concerning the description of women. We do know that on the cover of Weer's book, the story of the Golden Mermaid is depicted — a fairy tale which has a sorcerer in the form of a wolf who tells the

youngest of three princes that the golden apples of his father have been stolen by a golden bird. (The prince is killed by his brothers but resurrected by the golden mermaid who loves him, lingering over his body). There is mention of golden faces at the start of *Peace* as well: "The stars that seem to ride our winds cause them. Sometimes I think to see huge faces bending between those stars to look through my two windows, faces golden and tenuous, touched with pity and wonder; and then I rise from my chair and limp to the flimsy door, and there is nothing" (16) Yet this contemplation seems more related to his speculation on the metaphysical nature of the universe and its inversion in the spiritual world, so that the peripheral becomes the center, and does not necessarily parallel that golden aspect of the fairy tale. In the story itself, what then is the significance, if any, to the bird imagery below? It seems that much of it must revolve around

the central symbol of the text — the egg for which Olivia vies with McAfee. Indeed, this bird imagery begins at his fifth birthday party when the women get together to "fake" the signing of the treaty between the Indians and the settlers of the town by pretending to be natives: Mrs. Singer becomes Princess Singing Bird and Mrs. Green Princess Little Bird. Although this renaming of the characters is joking, they all become "princesses"; Weer even thinks of the servant Hannah as Princess Foaming Water. This treaty involves the gift of the land in perpetuity until the last descendant of Determination Blaine should perish — and Olivia's (Princess Star-Behind-Sun) decision to not marry Blaine actually brings this particular condition to life: Stewart Blaine will have no offspring. (Incidentally, this forged deer skin document is later presented as true at the school, certainly fitting in with the theme introduced with the forger Gold.)

Additionally, an extremely mythic mention of birds begins at the Christmas visit to his grandfather. At this Christmas, he receives not only the Green Fairy Book, but his knife as well. The description of the grandfather's house involves an interesting bird: The museum-like front parlor with some large bird beneath a glass bell jar on the center table, as though the company — would be expected to sit studying its dust-free molt, as though this were the simurg, the last bird of its kind in all the world, as though my grandfather were expecting a company of naturalists, and perhaps it was, and perhaps, indeed, he did. (36) The light that Weer sees as he goes down in the night in the belief that it is morning is described on that same page as "as soft as a two-day old chick" (and he also sees out under the stars on the river, a steamboat). I think this conflation of the Simurg and Christmas is vital, as it serves as the opposite book end of the

Chinese Egg which Olivia desires so badly, painted with its resurrection scenes. In the story of Elaia and her suitors, the suitor related to McAfee presents the princess with "a magical bird of ruby and amethyst" whose singing can calm the sea (82). If the egg could hatch, what would it become? "It'd be blasphemy to put it under an ordinary hen like that — It might hatch something little and squirmy, with a hundred little teeth as sharp as needles" (138). (Of course the most bizarre artifact in the Lorn household is not the egg but the pot painted with orange and black faces that represent, supposedly, owners who have died, ostensibly some from the Lorn family). The imagery continues: when Blaine and Olivia run into Ricepie before the story shifts to her visit to the Lorn residence to bargain for the egg, the door opens like a bird wing. When they go to the Lorn's, Margaret Lorn's umbrella is a "black bird". Julius Smart and Mr. Tilly eat at the Bluebird Diner, which evokes Prince Charming from the Green Fairy Book. The Simurg already mentioned at his grandfather's house right before he thinks of the Christmas tree is the Persian bird associated with the tree of life. In addition, the Simurg is known as Zumrud, which means emerald, and Emerald Lorn is the one selling the egg Olivia wants so badly (Ireland is also known as the Emerald Isle, and it is no coincidence that many of the families are of Gaelic origin). Avian imagery keeps coming: when Peacock and Olivia explore the cavern, she is called "bird boned". When she is down in the cave, she leaves her China milk glass shaped like a

sitting hen with an olive inside it, to represent that she was there. In the final story the sidhe children become a flock of geese, slowly dying off until only one remains. At one point Weer thinks about being twenty-five and seeing a dead bird as all the color in the wasteland before him. Later

he ruminates that murderers and their victims become one, certainly hinting that the dead bird involves Peacock and Olivia, since Olivia was the "intellectual" heart and color of the town, and a peacock is a colorful bird. Weer also spies an earthenware figure in this memory mirrors Peacock's fairy tale identification as the son of the king of the gnomes, who perhaps reeked too much of earth for the princess to desire. This imagery jives with Damien Broderick's supposition that Peacock is indeed Olivia's killer, indicating that symbolically the dead colorful bird in Weer's vision must be Olivia.

????When he visits Blaine to discuss The Lusty Lawyer forgery, Blaine is described with "cold eyes, that made me think of a mad king, of Lear lording it over a flock of rooks on a windswept heath" (In some myths the Simurg is conflated with the Rukh) Lear of course casts out his faithful daughter for the obsequious ones - and this is interesting in light of the later description of Sally Gold and the modified story from the Children of Lir of Dierdre and her two siblings turned to geese.

The mother Sally Gold has the most prominent birdlike description in the text: "she cocked her head to one side to look at me, as though I were a doubtful worm. ... the little birdlike woman, and the heat and perhaps the rubber plant in the corner and the pattern of interlocking green tendrils in the wallpaper, gave me the feeling of being in an elaborate aviary" - more bird imagery here ... and it echoes the early choice of Mrs. Green to be known as Princess Little Bird rather than something more appropriate like Corngrower. There seems to be a definite relationship between green and the mention of birds (Olivia's greenish color of choice to represent herself, Emerald Lorn, whose daughter has the bird-like umbrella, this green aviary, the hair of Olivia described with hair as like "a starling's wing")

Other innocuous things, like the planed board Peacock speaks to Weer about, seems to Weer "the feather from a bird petrified." Finally, the story of Dierdre at the end and her flock of geese is one of paternal love for his children, wanting them to last. The theme certainly relates to the story of Doris, shipped off to a "metamorphic" carnival to be preserved by her absent father. Is the affection which is lacking in Weer that feeling of having failed a daughter? The final section of the book is rife with this paternal speculation - a female employee is asked if she has children:

'When I used to think about having children that was one thing I used to think of - when they were grown I could bring them something when they were sick and maybe straighten up their houses'

'Do you think it is a good place to bring up children? ... '

'It's not good, no.' (306)

The dog boy's letter certainly shares the parental theme in its carnival Cinderella tale. And all this talk of progeny leads us back to the resurrection egg. What would that egg hatch into? It is Lorn and Weer who look for it, though this one seems fated to never hatch — is the Cinderella/abandoned daughter story at all related to this sterile egg of possible failed redemption? In addition to this egg symbolism, the relationship between the tree of life and the Simurg is particularly interesting to me, given the resonance of trees with death in the text. Is there any promise that the egg will hatch and the Simurg be born, turning Weer's deathly elm into something transcendently salvific?