

short story 59: Melting

The Urth list — 5 messages, 2 voices, 24 Apr 2014

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Marc Aramini — 24 Apr 2014, 20:41

“Melting” first appeared in 1974 in Orbit 15. Melting? is one of my favorite Gene Wolfe stories on the

strength of its marvelous last line: a dismissal of all but the irate ego, possibly threatening the reader with the dissipation the characters have just suffered.

SUMMARY:

John Edwards attends “the best cocktail party in the world” in a penthouse apartment with a garden, ruins, and an airship moored to the building. There is wine and hashish. To his left is a British man he thinks looks like the military man Bagnold, and near him are an ever-auburn haired girl. There is another girl on his right with constantly shifting hair. Across from him a Tibetan/Nepalese man seems to understand mystic powers such as kindling flames from nothing, which he provides to a being from the Farther Stars, who in turn resembles a washing machine.

They discuss the nature of the party; supposedly mankind’s mastery of time has allowed figures from the past and future to mingle here through temporal arresters, which can be used to return again after years have passed in real time. The girl with shifting hair tries to get John Edwards to sleep with her in the dark so that she can slip away for a decade or more into her time and return an old woman after lovers no longer want her.

The man from the Farther Stars says that many of them attending are tulpas, mental projections, and the Englishman identifies John Edwards as such. The Tibetan here describes the nature of tulpas, mind stuff that never lived given flesh, and that the practice has been perverted by the west.

The auburn hair girl is sick, and Edwards takes her to the lavatory. As she goes to vomit, a cock crows unheard, and then the “people went out like candles in the wind.” She says she loved him, or at least liked him, and she too disappears. John Edwards ponders how much all these tulpas cost him, before waking in bed to the sounds of a washing machine next door, old and gray. He swears that he will do it again, before he vanishes and a heretofore unseen narrator’s/god’s voice proclaims, “I was tired of him, anyhow. (I’m getting tired of all of you.)?”

COMMENTARY

There are at least three scenarios that are plausible to explain these happenings, and we will look at them quickly before dealing with the many cultural references and coming to a conclusion.” The last line can be read as a metafictional

one: all these characters are but marginal thought forms of the author for a time given shape, and they now dissolve into nothing, but I prefer to think of that final voice as a bit more supernatural and powerful one than, say, simply Gene Wolfe playing a metafictional trick with representation and the written word.

Let us look at the opening passage first: ??I am the sound a balloon makes falling into the sky; the sweat of a lump of ice in a summer river.? Here we have something which momentarily has

a shape losing it as it is assimilated into the vastness of its element: that melted ice joins the river as more water indistinguishable from the whole, that air trapped in the balloon is now a part of the air filling the atmosphere, assimilated completely. Spirit or thought

given form can also return to its natural spiritual or mental source. A human only has temporary form before the

animating life force is gone in death.

The book that John Edwards can't quite make out continues

the pattern from the opening poem: "I am the sound of an owl's wings, the heartbeat of a banyan tree." The owl is

notorious for having silent wings — what is nothingness? We will discuss the importance of the banyan

tree to Buddhism and Hindu thought below.

POSSIBILITY 1: TEMPORAL ARREST THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

The Tibetan posits one explanation for the party : temporal

arresters through a machine "so subtle it is in a card contained." One can attend the party, leave back to real

time, and come back after years of living to the moment of departure. While this is the SFnal explanation for what

is going on, the ending of the story seems to tear this reading apart a bit,

when the cock crows, the sun rises, and everyone disappears save John Edwards and the objects.

They each seem to have a time period, with the Englishman,

the Tibetan, and Joseph Bonaparte being from the past. The auburn haired girl says she was born

under Aquarius (Jan 20th-Feb 18th) and conceived over

the sign of the Pig and Whistle, an archetypal name for a tavern in England.

Under this reading, the Tibetan might have actually been pulled

from his time because of his interesting or important status (is he the Dalai Lama? Why the scars on his chest?) others for their beauty, or others by paying a high cost (though the Tibetan does not indicate it is necessarily a monetary cost). "The man from the Farther Stars

insists that some of those in attendance are simply thoughtforms/tulpas, and the Englishman identifies John Edwards as one of these, and the temporal arrest reading (pulling interesting characters from history now that ?Mankind's mastery of the laws of Time makes it possible to ask the people of the past to parties") does not explain the dualistic pseudo real nature of the physical objects winking out after the rising of the sun.

POSSIBILITY 2: TULPAS FOR PROFIT

The man from the farther stars, who so resembles a washing

machine, remarks that "many are tulpas — at least ten percent" in a voice that "was water dashing against stone".?? A tulpa

in Buddhism is a body made from mental will: a physical form conjured from thought. In Tibetan Buddhism it is

considered a manifestation or thoughtform.

At first the Englishman stresses that John Edwards is merely a tulpa because of his regular features. When everyone melts, John Edwards finds himself wondering how much all those tulpas must have cost him. However, the statements of the two girls indicate that perhaps John Edwards was generated for them: "But don't you understand" I knew him when I was young. — this from the girl with the ever changing hair, which is at first made up of caged birds living but too small to be alive, then of braided coils, and then of a blond style which seems a bit too young for her. The auburn haired girl also indicates that she "loved" or ?liked? past tense — John Edwards, but is now too sick to ask for a even kiss.

The Tibetan says that "Certain lamas learn siddhis to flesh images from mind stuff ? [the] same as ghosts, but never lived," and that this practice has been stolen by the West. Siddhis are more or less magical powers cultivated through meditation. They run the gamut from power to know the past, present, and future; infinite heaviness or lightness; unrestricted access to places; being free from bodily hunger; and even dying when one desires.

The perversions of the West could very well be for profit, and it seems that someone could very easily have funded this escape and populated it with thoughtforms to make an excellent party.

POSSIBILITY 3: AN ILL, DYING MAN READING UP ON BUDDHISM

However, in light of the conclusion and the constant description of the man from the Farther Stars as like a washing machine, the most likely explanation for this party is the meditation of John Edwards in his old age, imagining being wanted by women he has known, populating his party with interesting people (who the auburn haired girl describes as "terrible"). The man from the Farther Stars, who is like a statue and a washing machine, whose head moves rhythmically from side to side and whose voice is water crashing against stone, also indicates that sunspots destroy tulpas, and that there are "always sunspots on the sun, sun-where".?? Sunspots are related to solar flare activity and possibly variations in radiation emitted.

At the end, "the garden vanished, and the walls of the apartment rushed in, growing dirty as they came". In the apartment next door the washing machine goes to its rinse cycle, repeating "sun-where, sun-where, sun-where — sunspots destroy tulpas". This doesn't seem to be the environs of a rich man, and the hair on the back of his arms has become gray with age. Earlier in the story the younger version of John Edwards responds to the statement "You've all the time in the world." If you've got the card, with "I don't." This negation could just as well be towards having all the time in the world as to having the card, and it seems unlikely that this poor man living in apartments small enough to hear the washing machine next door would have the funds to generate all the thought constructs for his garden party.

The auburn haired girl wants to kiss him, but she is too sick and ready to vomit — perhaps this is brought to John Edward's conscious attention because he is extremely sick as well, and he can't even remember "how old he really was."

In addition, there is a point during which the Tibetan speaks “half to the auburn-haired girl, half to the birdcage girl, totally to John Edward”, which would seem to indicate that they, with their attraction to the idealized version of him, are simply mental projections/fantasies of John. The penthouse is identified as “someone’s (never mind whose)? and all in all it seems that the old John Edward’s readings have conjured a fantasy of one last party before he melts into non-existence through death.

The book propped on his dresser seems a very philosophical or Buddhist text, and may have prompted the thought of the Tibetan holy man.” “I am the sound of an owl’s wing, the heartbeat of a banyan tree” are both practically nonexistent. The banyan tree, because of its beginning as

a parasitic tree which envelops the host eventually, does have some religious significance. In Buddhism it symbolizes

how a temptation or sin can overcome human nature — in Hindu theology the material world is a banyan tree with its roots upwards and its branches below, and Krishna identifies himself as the banyan tree in the Bhagavad Gita.

I think it most likely that “Melting” represents the thoughts of an elderly sick man influenced by his philosophical reading and his circumstances to populate his dreams with figures from his past, for the true form of temporal arrest is in memory. Soon his consciousness will be no more, and the party that he swears to “do”

again just a passing whimsy as he dissipates into that narrator’s voice, which immediately turns to us.

FURTHER ALLUSIONS:

There is a slight vibe of Moorcock’s *Dancers at the End of Time*, but those stories of decadent and

eternal partying at the end of everything are fairly contemporary to this work, starting in 1972, to be considered as a definite influence.

JOHN EDWARDS AND LORD HARRY (THE DEVIL)

While the name “John Edwards” could be a multitude of literary, political, or scholarly figures, I tend to think that ending invokes the famous Johnathan Edwards, with his sermon “Sinners in the hands of an Angry God” — the point is that God can at any time, at a whim, make the foot of the mighty slide, and that all men are ultimately loathsome to him like a spider, and that they can be cast into the pit save for arbitrary mercy. It appears as though John Edwards arbitrary

mercy has run out at the end. John

Edward’s final oath seems to me to reinforce this allusion:

“By the Lord Harry — in a day or so — when I’m feeling better — I’m going to do that again.” He vanishes immediately after. Lord Harry is the devil — this final oath,

invoking the devil by another name, also indicates that our main character is very sick, perhaps to the point of death. It is clear he isn’t feeling well, and the parasitic nature of the

banyan tree as well as the idea that the sun eradicates all these tulpas invokes to my mind perhaps an illness brought on by exposure such as cancer.

It seems to me that time has run out, and the light of the sun has snuffed out the old man’s life. Could he be dying of melanoma, sun spots on his skin destroying him and symbolically melting him away?

BAGNOLD AND THE LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP

The Englishman reminds Edwards of the innovative desert commander-engineer Ralph Bagnold (1896-1990) who has several claims to fame: crossing the Libyan desert, innovative WWII dessert raiding strategies, and even a scientific study on wind and dunes. The Englishman's actual experiences at the hotel Shepherd with a Belgian girl in Cairo and under Edmund Allenby's (1861-1936) Egyptian Expeditionary Force probably close to 1917 indicate that he isn't actually Bagnold (but might be someone who eventually served on his staff or advised him, such as Archibald Wavell). The German invasion the Belgian girl's memory evokes occurred in 1914-1916. The Englishman uses the French pejorative to describe Germans — Boche.

No doubt the engineering fame of Bagnold prompted Wolfe to include him in the story, and Bagnold's studies of desert wind do resonate with the people "going out like candles in the wind."

CONCLUSIONS:

The theological implication that human identity will one day vanish and melt into something else, like that ice cube which has temporary form and assimilates back into the river, equating life with the thought projection of the deity, seems the most likely explanation for what is going on here, but that irritated "I'm getting tired of all of you" remains disturbing.

RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHER WORKS:

The dying man's fantasies hold a special place in Wolfe's work — his novel *Peace* is constructed around just such a conceit, but this one, with the phantasmagorical approach to reality, really does remind me of "Cues" and "The Green Wall Said" or even "To The Dark Tower Came" and "Three Fingers" in the somewhat illusory/hallucinatory nature of the solid and real.

Jeff Wilson — 25 Apr 2014, 00:22 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On Thu, April 24, 2014 15:41, Marc Aramini wrote:

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The projection of the dying man's sensations onto the party's attendees makes me think it is some kind of nested reincarnation, and the "tired of him" voice is his atman remarking on a lengthy enfleshment, and "tired of all of you" suggests to me that the dying man is the atman's tulpa, as perhaps other people may be; I seem to recall it is "allowed" for one person to be reincarnated as multiple people.

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Marc Aramini — 25 Apr 2014, 00:30 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

His final oath by "lord Harry" (the devil) and the name John Edwards and the sinners in the hands of an angry god connection, though, makes me think those final words are more like an

irate deity whose thoughts are reality as in Dante's model of creation, stricken with an arbitrary weariness of holding the man as "real" in his thoughts any longer.

Certainly though the sound of a balloon falling into air and ice melting into the sea would fit with a logos/world spirit/atman kind of return.

Sent from my iPhone

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Jeff Wilson — 25 Apr 2014, 15:18 · in reply to Marc Aramini

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Yes, there is that approach (I need to repost something of that nature here) where "God's creature" as Edwards calls Creation has no independent existence any more than the image of my words can be independent of the monitor you read them on. In this case, the Trinity can be considered the atmans underlying created entities (and the Godhead the layer below them, perhaps).

Perhaps "Lord Harry" is the hairy-armed man himself, and gives up the ghost after his time bedeviling the human race is complete represented by the union of all time and space. The trials of humanity thru the ages are complete and the tiresome Satan guise is dropped; the end of trials also mean the end of interesting opportunities for moral growth, and the static nature is also boring to the Creator.

This final dissolution of mortal identities would dovetail nicely with the favored outcome of Buddhism as I understand it; individuals become enlightened dispelling the illusory "self" as their fundamentally connected nature emerges, leaving only "the" atman behind.

It would then be an early example of GW's principle that false religions ultimately lead to true.

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