

Short Story 70: To the Dark Tower Came

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Marc Aramini — 26 Jul 2014, 01:21

"To the Dark Tower Came" first appeared in Orbit in 1977 and is collected in *Storeys from the Old Hotel.*

SUMMARY WITH SUBJECTIVE COMMENTS:

Gloucester and Kent, "who would die that day", discuss the senility of their ruler in a very cold tower. Gloucester provides a fake history for the word senile, saying it comes from the verb sendan (Anglo Saxon for "to transmit") and Nilus, which he claims is a "mythical" river in Africa where old ruins were scattered (we know the Nile is real though, right? And that the real root of senile is the latin senex/senilis to connote "old").

They peer out a small window through ivy, and Kent says he sees fog, but Gloucester states they are clouds, but that they will still manage to get down eventually. Kent believes if he jumps out and leaves the window unguarded, a bear or jaguar might enter. Gloucester says, "poor creature", but his pity is a bit ambiguous in its placement — does he feel that way regarding Kent or any beast entering the tower? They discuss their desire to be gone and to courtier no more, and Kent reveals one of his ancestors could fly (Clark Kent, of course). Gloucester gives his own take on Superman (Nietzsche style), and then vast wings outside prompt Kent to put his head and shoulders through the small window. Though the walls of the tower appear flat, "Kent knew it to be round .. (Some indeed, said that [the radius of the tower] was infinite)."

Kent climbs out onto the dark green foliage over an enormous void. A vampire flies outside dislodging men and women climbing the ivy. Then it catches them in their fall and does something uncertain to them, enfolding them in wings "like a scud of sooty smoke" that makes them disappear.

Gloucester assumes the mass of the tower is so great that it has its own atmosphere, with its center being the resultant of the attraction between the tower, earth, and moon. He calls the tower the "Spire Sans Summit." They speculate that it connects the earth and the moon, and Gloucester says, "There are footprints on the surface of the moon, you know. Even though the king would have us believe all this is happening long before that time." They descend.

"The room below might have filled all the tower, from wall to wall, with a domed ceiling higher in the center than the room was wide; so that it seemed like a world unto itself." Gloucester is thankful that it is an orrery rather than a throne room, though Kent says it still might be one.

A sun burns with thermonuclear fire and the walls painted with the zodiac, and a wounded bison says, "Long have I ruled — a hundred years and more" in the king's voice. The voice says he has starved his enemies and built his tower.

"In the dream of serving others, they have served me. Pisces the whale I penned in a tank of glass, sheltering her from the waters I poisoned. Does not that show the love I bore her" The

poison was needed for the making: scientist and sorcerer am I. (The consonance begun by Gloucester continues throughout).

Gloucester here says that "The lower parts of the tower are worse than the higher. Or the higher are worse than the lower, as may be," as rats as large as buckets gnaw through a hole near the bison's feet.

The king continues to talk, claiming that he can renew himself and that if he dies the tower would fall with him, with rats at the foundation. Kent is injured badly by the septic teeth of the rats, and then Gloucester "clove its spine with a single stroke." Gloucester promises to carry Kent wherever he wants to go, and then the boy king comes, invisible at first because the sun is at his back. "The boy wore a crown. He was about thirteen, but his eyes were the cold, mad eyes of the king. Maidens followed him; these had no eyes at all — only little flames, like candles burning, in the empty sockets." He claims he does not remember the names of Kent and Gloucester, and Gloucester replies, "In the beginning you called us Youth and Learning, sir; you promised us a great deal." Clearly, Kent is supposed to be Youth.

The king says that if they behave themselves, he will fulfill his earlier promises, but walks away when asked if he will heal Kent.

Kent says, "Call back the king, Gloucester, and carry me to the window. With one single bound I will leap this tall building; and that is something a boy should see."

DISCUSSION:

One of the themes of the story is certainly semiotic slippage (wait a minute, said the skeptical scholar...) In this case, I feel that it is an examination of the smallest unit of semiotics, called a sign — in this case, S.

Gloucester speaks in consonant sibilance from the first page when he starts in on senility, and it continues throughout: "So you say it's fog. All right, sir, climb out. So soon as your feet are on good, solid, ground — I pride myself sir, on being a sound sullen scholar; and when there is nothing more to be done, we triple ?S" men recast the data — integrate, integrate, integrate, and three pump handles.

I suppose the appearance of the integration symbol in math here serves as a command that looks like an S but has a rigorous application, transforming the letter s from an idealized unit or phoneme into a process command that follows precise mathematical rules, and then finally into a symbolic near representation that serves a less mental and more practical function in the form of old ?s? shaped pump handles. The S, placed on a man, obviously summons images of the impervious Superman, who Kent will emulate (thus being both Clark Kent and Shakespeare's Earl of Kent from King Lear). Gloucester's take on Superman is closer to that of Nietzsche or George Bernard Shaw than DC comics: Gloucester claims he was "A symbolic figure — he represented the strong man who, ridding himself of the superstitions of the past, devoted himself to improving his own powers and achieving mastery of others. Actually there have been a number of people who've tried it, but someone always shoots them."

Fascinatingly, the idea of Nietzsche's Übermensch posits an existence devoid of spiritual or otherworldly aspirations, and the surrealistic setting of "To The Dark Tower" belies and undercuts this possibility (note, too, that Kent's plunge off the Tower will kill him). However, it does set up an interesting examination of something diseased and crazy ruling in the orrery, set up to look like the solar system. Gloucester claims that the Nile river is nothing but a fiction, and the orrery is an artificial but enormous room in the tower with an artificial sun and planets and

an insane ruler, which seem to encompass the entire tower, which spans the moon and earth. The gnostic, fake, highly engineered reality on display has little behind it — the King is not actually hiding behind the wainscot, but when he does appear, he cannot at first be seen because the sun is at his back (note the light of the sun almost effacing the existence of the son, here).

What do particular images stand for? It seems that the bison which is shot by an arrow and called the monarch of the plain, so important in American History, also seems to grow from the wooden panels of the zodiac (of which Wolfe is a Taurus born in May, the bull). The bison has been shot to the heart (in addition to resonating with the hunting to extinction and the loss of that innocent early America, also invokes Sagittarius the archer).

Since Wolfe admits that this story came almost fully grown from a dream, with a bit of polishing, any interpretation has to question — how much conscious polishing?

“Once in a rare while, I have a dream so vivid and organized that it can be written with a minimum of polishing; these dreams are always like nightmares, like ‘To the Dark Tower Came.’ I can’t imagine why anyone would want to psychoanalyze me, but if anybody does, that’s the place to start.”

Is there enough polish to escape a surreal and imagistic impression with a more concrete, scientific, and traditional narrative structure? Symbolism (Wolfe’s favorite S concept, no doubt) in Wolfe is always tricky because it is surprisingly concrete — in *New Sun*, water somehow becomes healing, death, and resurrection in almost every metaphor, and on a re-read it is no surprise that healing will involve a deluge. The symbols somehow become concrete within the plot (as, at least I believe, the Shadow Children riding Marshmen in **Fifth Head of Cerberus** clues us into Shadow Children infecting Marsch). This concrete and literal use of symbols sets Wolfe apart from some other authors (Vronsky riding a horse to death is certainly a symbol of how he will treat Anna Karenina, for example, but edit out that scene and nothing will have changed in the plot — we will merely have less insight into his character in advance).

Borski once posited that the tower represented higher education, and its corruption of literary values and perhaps anti-religious stances shows the academics being cast off the tower by a rather shadowy, winged, vampiric influence. I am not willing to ascribe this reading to the text, but I do feel that somehow there is a commentary on religion and learning and the effects they have on youth. Why does Kent/Youth need to die to inspire the boy-king of thirteen to regain sanity? Is it a symbol of sacrificial heroism?

LITERARY AND CULTURAL REFERENCES:

The opening quote from *King Lear*, in which Edgar spouts nonsense, is unfortunately potentially rife with allusive powers: “Child Rowland to the dark tower came, His word was still, - Fire, foh, and fum, I smell the blood of a British man.” While we know that **King Lear** is clearly referenced here with Gloucester and Kent, it is conceivable that “The Song of Roland”, Browning’s poem “Child Rowland to the Dark Tower Came”, and Jack and the Beanstalk are all invoked. (Does Wolfe dream doggerel Shakespeare quotations?) Certainly the quote shows how even mad verse with no meaning gains great significance culturally over time — we can read that and are instantly reminded of a poem and the story of a Giant falling to his death. Since Shakespeare begins with S, I think he should be the focus of our analysis.

Quickly, *Lear* involves a possibly senile king allowing false words of love from two insincere daughters to sunder his kingdom as he casts out a less obsequious but more loving one. The Earl of Kent is banished for objecting to the injustice of this decision, while Gloucester’s

legitimate and illegitimate sons come into conflict, with the illegitimate one tricking Gloucester into mistrusting his son Edgar (whose quote begins our Wolfe story). Edgar disguises himself as a madman, and also Kent returns in disguise to serve Lear. Gloucester is blinded and wants to jump to his death, but is dissuaded by Edgar, who convinces Gloucester he has miraculously survived a great fall. This plot element of King Lear resonates most with the jump of Kent in the end of Wolfe's story as he seeks to become Superman — and inspire the King, perhaps hoping to cure him of his insanity in his renewed, impressionable young state. When Lear dies in the Shakespearean play, he wants to leave the kingdom to Kent and Edgar, but Kent refuses, saying that he must leave. Gloucester and the King die in the play, but in Wolfe's story Kent is the only one to die (in a suicidal leap).

Jack and the Bean Stock and the mighty foliage with the castle in the sky, ending with a mighty fall, could also mimic that leap at the end of Wolfe's story, but the *King Lear* analogies seem strongest.

Besides the tower of the Browning poem, there is little relationships between Wolfe's story and the poem. In Browning's version, it seems that Roland travels across a decimated and forlorn landscape, his fellow knights ignominiously dead, guided by a mystic he mistrusts but follows anyway, to almost pass by but finally see the dark tower and blow his horn, ending the poem. The Song of Roland, a more heroic work, involves the conflict between the Muslims and Charlemagne. Roland here is betrayed by his Uncle, and refuses to blow his horn to call for reinforcements from Charlemagne until his entire regiment perishes from his Uncle Ganelon's treachery. I have always felt the blowing of the horn in the Browning poem acknowledged a futile kind of death given symbolic form in the appearance of the dark tower (a goal which is reached but never entered), but there are no horns in Wolfe's story, so I see little reason to list either of these works as intrinsic to the understanding of the story, as the tower is present in Shakespeare's nonsense verse as well.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

The treatment of S and Gloucester's association with a mathematical command and a physical tool shows the interesting take on letters as almost hieroglyphic representations that Wolfe plays with in all manner of ways — in describing the letters of the name Johann as character attributes in "Silhouette", in scenes in New Sun in which the word "last" contains a serpent and a sword, in "Cues" where missing and misplaced letters are indicative of a certain tarot deck, and in the short story "Alphabet" where creation itself seems to be a written endeavor. Certainly the influence of Borges and the theosophical musings that liken existence to a word from the mouth of God, and even spirit as Logos, influence this presentation. In many ways, "To the Dark Tower" is about this deep symbolic depth in our systems of representation, and perhaps it shows a kind of almost rational progression from dream images to ideal representations onward to the creation of practical symbols and functions that are somehow all indirectly related, but related nevertheless.

I feel that this is one of the more obvious forays into metafiction that some of Wolfe's more postmodern work occasionally approaches, such as "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story", and as such it is difficult to pin down exactly how concrete the conflict and symbols can actually be — ie, can we tell what the penned Pisces is, or who the flame eyed attendants of the king are?

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Besides showing the vast connotations of the letter S (or things that look like it), why should the story be so sibilant? Why are there no serpents?

What do the Bison and the Pisces saved from poisoned waters really symbolize? I have posited that the Bison is the demiurge through its ruling of an unspoiled America (Land of the Free and what not) and through its connection to the Bull/Taurus that is Gene Wolfe's Zodiac sign, speaking as the "King" as demiurge and author and also assuming something of the qualities of the Judeo Christian God, returning as boy, but that is mere supposition.

Who is the King? He says that he is "scientist" and "sorcerer". The statement "In the dream of serving others, they have served me" creates a fairly Christian ideology (as well as reconstituting himself as a young boy), but immediately mentioning the penned whale saved from poison creates a slightly more negative impression. He seems to be able to transcend time and his tower is possibly infinite, but is he truly omnipotent if the rats can eat away his tower and existence fail? It seems that this reality is meant to be "behind" ours and outside of time, because Gloucester knows there are footprints on the moon even though his setting is supposedly the past. What are the rats that eat the tower? Is the idea of the death of God intrinsic to the concept of the *Urbemensch* poisoning the King, too? Instead of the Superman killing God, the superman here, devoid of actual super powers, sacrifices himself to perhaps help renew and inspire the King. Is the story about the hubris of reaching for the heavens in a tower to the sky, and is the final sacrifice Kent makes successful?