

Short Story 71: Silhouette

The Urth list — 10 messages, 5 voices, 29 Jul 2014

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Marc Aramini — 29 Jul 2014, 04:50

Silhouette

Silhouette was published in *The New Atlantis* in 1975. It is collected in *Endangered Species*.

SUMMARY:

The story opens with a quote from Ambrose Bierce's "A Psychological Shipwreck":

To sundry it is given to be drawn away, and to be apart from this body for a season, for, as concerning rills which would flow across each other the weaker is borne along by the stronger, so there be certain of kin whose paths intersecting, their souls do bear company, the while their bodies go fore-appointed ways, unknowing.

In the far future, set in a constantly shifting low gravity space ship in search of new planets to inhabit after the Earth has been ecologically damaged, it seems that a recent war has placed German culture at the forefront and that a rigid class caste system is in place in which those of higher class can periodically request even sexual favors from those of the lower classes, which cannot be refused except for medical reasons. The ship was originally controlled by a computerized God-like overmonitor which has become something of a useless, seldom consulted oddity, scrapped by its female Captain.

The ship has reached the double star system of Algol, the winking demon, and is exploring a planet with a supposedly breathable atmosphere. The thick foliage on the planet fights to get underneath and escape the harsh ultraviolet rays of Algol, fleeing the sun rather than seeking it out. The Captain wants them to make a landing on the planet to populate it for 2 years so they can then return to Earth, but different and mutinous groups are vying for control of the ship. Johann, a senior officer, notes that the lights in his chamber are failing, but maintenance can find nothing wrong.

He requests the presence of a lower class crew member named Grit, who is reluctant to accede but must. Johann, off duty, goes to speak to Grit on the bridge but is kicked off by the Captain — it is clear that he wanted to be a part of the expedition.

A male crew member named Emil comes with words of endearment for Johann, who treats him coldly. He calls Johann "O betrothed of fortune." He indicates that Johann wants to be a captain, unlikely now that the war is over, and the reason that Johann joined this expedition. Johann was promoted to Lieutenant sometime during the journey, and his leg has also been smashed. Emil asks to be called Grit, so that he can hear affection in Johann's voice, but Johann refuses.

Johann naps then goes into the three sided corridors where crewmen walk on all the sides — gravity is only maintained by the sandals they wear. He goes to the old library table to gamble

with books. The books mentioned are a Dore engraved *New Testament*, Thornton Wilder's *The Eighth Day*, Dineson's *Seven Gothic Tales*, Chesterton's *The Wild Knight*, a guide to the wild birds in Texas, a manual of letter writing, a historical almanac, and a handbook on power tools. When Johann goes to eat it is revealed a new girl, plump Gretchen is the undercook, since the old one, Anna, killed herself. Much of the crew and the marines who serve as the main fighting force have been asleep for the 17 year duration of the trip. Otilie the main cook, puts an arm around Gretchen and gives her food in another sexually suggestive moment.

Johann returns to his room and "reads" *The Wild Knight*, then hears a whispering in his room, and he feels "for an instant the icefoam wall panel with its single light seemed very far away — as far as Algol itself, millions of kilometers down a tunnel in space. It throbbed like a heart."

Grit awakens him floating in his chamber and refuses to serve him now, believing he is ill or on some drug. Johann's forehead is cut, and she washes it as he touches her breasts, which she objects to. When she leaves, he finds that his shadow is immensely dark and no detail can be found where it falls. It whispers to him. When he closes his eyes, he hears "the soft sound of air-blown sand, dry and insistent, and the scuttling of a small animal" and a sighing wind he knows to be unreal. A voice ask, "Friend?" to which he replies affirmatively.

He visits the doctor, Karl, who diagnoses a concussion and suggests he has nice legs and shoulders. Here Johann reveals that while he was asleep he dreamed he was on the planet below, following it to a chasm full of waterfalls and giant ferns and orchids. He will mention this visit later when he fights Helmut, the man whom Johann believes both the Captain and Grit prefer.

Johann knows that the Captain wants to convince the government humanity can settle on the planet Neuerddraht, but Johann believes living on planets is a mistake. Johann questions the breathable nature of the air since breathing devices are being used, and the Captain chastises him. (In this scene, Grit is filling in for Gerta, showing something of their interchangeability, though clearly Grit is a less refined, chubbier female — see the refinement of Sap discussion below).

When Johann returns to his chambers, Heinz and Emil are waiting for him with incense burning. The cabal of mystics, Heinz, Emil, Gerhart, and Elsa, all had some form of vision of Johann's name, and Heinz discusses the signification of each of the letters, saying that in times of crisis a priest will appear, and that they believe Johann will be that priest. Johann asserts that Earth must be dead by now and laments the loss of traditional values. Heinz and Emil want to go to the planet, and Johann says he has no power to influence events or he would be down on the planet himself.

Almost immediately after they leave, he does find himself walking on the planet, smelling something like a fire in a flower garden or myrrh. He sees trees black against Algol's light, and walks towards them, at which point the voice implores him not to turn around. The voice says it did not bring Johann, and promises to tell only the truth. Johann says, "Promises no longer hold. There is nothing left to swear by. No honor. No God." To this the voice replies that "You still have the word. I found it in your mind." (Note that in *Faust*, for comfort, Johann Faust looks in the gospel of John, which begins with the rather famous "In the beginning was the Word ...").

The voice thanks Johann for returning him to the planet and says that Johann sleeps but is not dreaming. He turns around to see his shadow in Algol's rays. When his hands touch the cruel spines of the first tree, the voice speaks to him again, saying, "I did not leave. But because you had seen me, you could not hear me. Now you cannot see, and so I can speak to you again. I can guide you through this, though it must be slowly." His body is moved and protected from

harm.

Gerta, the yeoman of his watch, wakes him, and at this point his room is bright again. Gerta says that "hell is going to pop on the bridge." When Johann arrives, he is in time to see Helmut tell the Captain a man has been seen on the planet, dressed like them.

Johann goes to talk to the overmonitor, which is called "God" by the crew. It had been fused to junk by the Captain but survived in fragments. He thinks of Neptune and the last message he sent to Marcella, then visualizes a frieze of the god Neptune. He asks why breathing apparatus must be worn on Neuerdraht and gets no real answer from the monitor save that they have been ordered to do so. The overmonitor does not clear channels automatically as it should, claiming that it doesn't as a matter of ship survival. The clerk's explanation is that it wants someone to talk to it so it keeps requesting questions. He thinks of the overmonitor as "the little man in Dostoevski's **Notes from the Underground,** hunched beneath the floor of some neglected storeroom in the remote module." The clerk claims the overmonitor is insane, but it estimates only a 0.237 probability of ship survival over five years for poor ship operation, low efficiency, and a failure to consult the overmonitor.

Johann returns to his bunk and looks up astral projection, directly mentioning Padre Pio and Goethe and revealing the date to be 2214 as he speaks into his voisriit. He notes that modern men are perhaps less honest, and speculates that the projection may involve the soul, then thinks of the body as a giant community of microorganisms, cousin to the microbes. A red haired woman named Uschi (a diminutive of Ursula, which means "little bear") comes to tell him the captain wants him.

The Captain is listening to music that suggests a storm. She speaks of Pleasureworld as the inspiration for the music, the first leisure satellite, where soil was made from guests' excrement and the trees without gravity grew like giant tangles of yarn. She reveals that the composer went into an arctic labor camp and never got to see the satellite. Her orderly brings in drug bugs, fancy and genetically modified crab lice that serve to expand the consciousness during sexual encounters. Johann reveals he hasn't been there since the first year of the journey and his leg was crushed. Here it is revealed that the captain has had cosmetic surgery to make her eyes the green color of algae.

He hallucinates of an encounter with his old Earth girlfriend Marcella, in the wild wind and flowers of nature, vowing never to return to the artificial city. He comes to his senses with an orderly cleaning him, and then returns to his compartment to be met with Heinz, a woman, two other men, and an androgynous figure. They claim to be a coven of spiritualists who acknowledge that the physical world is an illusion (perhaps echoing the Walpurgis scenes in **Faust**). They believe that the void is people by beings of great power who can traverse space instantaneously without ships. His shadow is identified as a familiar.

Here the voice begins adding its words to Johann, asking what they want. He remembers an old jealous run in with Grit on Helmut's lap, snorting in powdery drugs and happy in her excess. He helps Helmut put her to bed, and she reveals that her birth name was Joan, though psychologists don't encourage mothers to select old fashioned names such as that one. His reverie over, Johann turns his attention back to his present situation.

Here, Heinz quotes, "Lying spirits all, whose rancor runs blacker than their reach." They reveal they will take the ship and rule as a group with voting power. Johann says there can only be one Captain. Johann says it would be more dangerous to be a part of that group than to fight against them openly. The shadow neutralizes them easily and cows them into retreat, though one throws a pick as he runs out. Johann signals the bridge and tells Horst that the five were

planning a mutiny.

He tries to ask his shadow what it is. Then he admits, "I know I'm not right. My mind has been slipping for some time — I know that. But you're real. — they were afraid of you." The shadow says, "By instinct I follow your will, to better remain in your shadow. If you disbelieve — I am inhibited from speech." Grit arrives to see if he is all right, and is surprised this is the first time he has been asked to take part in a mutiny. She indicates the Captain knows and that the bald man in the group was named Rudi, saying she is sorry he is mixed up with him. (Rudi means famed wolf).

Grit is bothered by the lights in his chamber. Johann shows some jealousy over Helmut and Grit and she says, "He's nice; he's fun to be with sometimes, and he's generous. — But he's not as handsome as you are, and not as strong, and he can be very silly at times." Here Grit says she is bothered by Johann's treatment of people he touches — thinking something which is perhaps implied to be possessive (or perhaps implying that it means something to him). She undresses. She reveals Rudi sells drugs and thought the cult only a sideline for the drug business. There is another dangerous group, those who want the overmonitor reinstated.

Johann is upset the Captain hasn't told him of all these groups threatening the ship. He pushes her away and she angers, saying "You're just the type, just the kind that does it. Alone all the time and so very, very intellectual. When was the last time you talked to the overmonitor?"

Grit says the overmonitor is the same thinking that ruined Earth, and Johann sees his shadow reach out and infect Grit's in an inversion of the Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*.

Later on the bridge, he watches the ship change, to which the yeoman of the watch, Gerta (taller and thinner than Grit) remarks how ugly it is, like a bacterial nucleus. Gerta says that the Captain is going to go down to the planet so that when she returns to Earth she can speak as a witness at hearings and interviews. Johann reveals he wants to see the planet as well, but that it already seems ruined by a race older than humanity.

The captain has woken up the marines who will defend the ship in case of a mutiny. Johann thinks that a yeoman is like a wife, and wonders why he has never been one of Gerta's lovers — she is tall and slender like the Captain. Johann kisses her neck as he starts to leave, but Erik, Helmut's second in command, interrupts his egress, saying that they found a city on the planet, with piers for the ships that the sand surges against. He shows a photo of three strange structures, and Johann goes to ask the overmonitor if he has left the ship, to which it replies that he has been absent or dead on several occasions.

The monitor says, "temporal quanta are not emitted at a uniform rate, but at a rate dependent upon the velocity of the body experiencing the time in question. Since time is composed of quanta, the reduction in the rate of passage of time must be explained as a reduction in the rate of emission of these quanta. This reduction implies the existence of hyper-time, by which the rate of emission is measured, and this in turn implies the existence of hyper-time intervals of some duration between the emission of the time quanta applicable to a rapidly moving body. If motion were continuous, it would cease with a consequent release of energy during these hyper-time intervals, since motion without time is motion at infinite velocity. No such releases of energy have been observed, from which it follows that motion is discontinuous — consisting of translations of the moving body from point to point, corresponding to the time quanta emitted. I will attempt to talk about this in the section labeled Quanta of Time below, but I think roughly the idea is that objects are discontinuous, and translations of the moving body from point to point need not be uniform in nature and can conceivably involve large jumps.

Johann believes Erik has been hallucinating, and requests to go down to the planet with Helmut and the marines. The Captain refuses. She says she has revived the marines because they have not been changed over the 17 year long journey and have their original patriotism.

Johann remembers leaving and writing Marcella why he must go, but remembers few details of the briefing before they left on the mission. He thinks that she is long dead.

Johann goes to the landing boats and inquires which brought Helmut back to the ship. He prepares a life boat with food, water, and survival gear for later escape. The shadow urges him to go, but he wants to take Grit and his books.

Helmut appears and asks if progress has been made studying the microorganisms from the planet. Helmut remarks the amount of them is astonishing considering how dry the planet is, and Johann reveals that there are water in the crevasses, with thicker air, and Helmut realizes Johann has been down on the planet and was the man his group saw. Helmut believes Johann is working for the Captain and immediately attacks, but his shadow prevents the blow like "black tissue" and also covers Helmut's mouth, killing him.

On his way out Johann sees a dead marine sentry and realizes the mutiny has begun, thinking Helmut might have been part of the occultists. The fighting has begun, and Johann ditches his blouse. His shadow succeeds in opening the Captain's compartment and he joins the Captain, Elis, Gerta, and Grit. She calls the mutinous group the C.O.C. and are trying to cut their way through to the bridge. On the screen, they see the dead Helmut, an illusion of the monitor, enter the lab where a laser is being built to cut through to the bridge. Johann reveals he has an escape pod and tells them they can escape to the watery crevasses of Neuerddraht. The Captain flirts with Grit on the way. Johann realizes that the overmonitor has begun to fight, too, and is interfering with the boards that would show the Captain which way to go and might be able to cut off and sever parts of the ship.

Johann knows that it cannot cut off the bridge so he encourages them to head back. Grit disappears after saying that she can smell the plants of the hydroponics module, which is now connected to the bridge. They run through the foliage of the hydroponics module (where Rudi was a technician) to the hatch of Johann's escape pod. The Captain indicates Johann should enter last, deferring to his rank as "the leader of the escape". He does not enter the pod and lets Gerta close the hatch, then apports back to the bridge as the tender is shot into space, his shadow standing before him on the hatch.

The fake Helmut tells the marines to surrender on his broadcast, but it is simply the overmonitor's bluff. Johann tears apart the connections allowing the fake broadcast and announces to all screens that the mutiny is over. He says he will pardon the mutineers and that loyal crew members are expected to help wipe out insurgents, identifying himself as Captain. The overmonitor indicates that five year survival is 0.383 probable and rising. Johann says he will not consult the overmonitor.

"In a storm, land as the enemy He kicked off his sandals and floated over to the navigation panel to begin the laborious business of setting a new course."

DISCUSSION:

Compared to Wolfe's other novellas of the 1970s, there is practically no critical discourse or extended discussion on "Silhouette." Ironically, though I find many of Borski's conclusions to be a step too far, his post on "Silhouette" is actually a good starting point, especially for

recognizing its deliberate and intentional Faust allusions (his Faustian analysis of Peace has far less overt textual support). The play Faust itself rambles quite a bit, so perhaps Borski's identification of the story as a mystery play goes too far. Those wishing to review his entire argument may do so here: <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0017/0072.shtml>

Are Johann's final actions good or selfish? It seems that the Captain and Gerta have been jettisoned to the planet despite his promise to return (or was that spoken to his shadow?). Grit simply vanishes, perhaps returning to the crevasses below, and those final moments certainly make us consider both the Faustian allusions and the storm motif that haunts the text.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

JOHANN WOLFGANG GOETHE OR JOHANN FAUST?:

Unlike many of the supposed references to Goethe in some other Wolfe, this one is exceedingly clear in referring to Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and besides being a man of many hats (artistic, political, and scientific), Goethe has that wolf like middle name to attract Gene's attention. The text even explicitly mentions "Goethe's friend" in regards to apportionment (though there are two apportionment stories in Goethe's life). The three females whose names begin with G (Grit, Gretchen, and Girta) can all be derived from Margeret, and his lost earth girl Marcella, has a name that begins with M.

Johann is the first name of both Goethe and his character Faust, but luckily the character in "Silhouette" is called "betrotted of fortune" by Emil — after a quick perusal of names meaning fortunate or lucky, I was astonished and edified to find Faust means exactly that: Fortunate or Lucky. So Johann is Faust. However, the actual mapping of the story of Faust onto Johann's struggle on ship is not so easy. Perhaps the despair and his unhealthy and ill-fated desire for Grit and the sad fate of his relationship with Gretchen forms one link, and we know that Mephistopheles serves as Faust's double at times in Goethe's version, but several key themes are ambiguous: the over-monitor indicates that Johann in charge of the ship greatly increases the chances of survival, and the shadow colony that follows him around always helps him in defeating the diabolists and followers of the over-monitor who threaten him.

Johann abstains from the drugged excesses of his peers, though the drug bug culled from a crab lice with the Captain does echo the scene in Faust when he deals with witches in a hallucinogenic kind of fairy story. It is almost impossible to identify the true devil in "Silhouette" - the over-monitor, the Captain who destroys it, Johann, his shadow, and the diabolists all seem to desire their own form of control over the formless ship, with Johann and his shadow emerging victorious (though the shadow is not explicitly mentioned again after he observes it on the escape pod).

Goethe's **Faust** begins with a Job-like deal between Mephistopheles and God, but the second part culminates in Faust's redemption, beginning with his journey into the womb or "realm of the mothers" to bring back ideal beauties. Perhaps the amniotic atmosphere of the ship and Johann's lament for the lost values of life resonate with the second part of **Faust** rather than the more readily apparent and well known first part. However, in the first part, Faust signs a contract in blood with Mephistopheles which will grant Faust's desires but cost him his soul at the moment of his greatest contentment. Johann receives some bloody wounds on the planet when he first comes into contact with his shadow familiar, and it does serve him as Mephistopheles serves Faust. Grit's disappearance in the final scenes before Johann steers the ship away from the planet also seem to resonate with the fate of Gretchen in the Faust play: in jail for killing her child, she refuses to escape while Faust and Mephistopheles flee. Johann finally has his captaincy and the ship may survive, but is his partial betrayal of Gerta and the

Captain amoral and damning?

OTHER LITERARY ALLUSIONS: STORMS, SHADOWS, DROWNING, AND DELUGES:

I feel that, much like **The Fifth Head of Cerberus**, the literary allusions throughout "Silhouette" contribute to its thematic conclusion. The opening quote, from Bierce's "A Psychological Shipwreck", is important for several reasons.

It deals with a supernatural affinity that, at least in the quote, if not in the story, sounds like apportionment, the transportation of consciousness across vast distances and time, and references a disastrous sea voyage that results in destruction. Its narrator is on ship with a young adopted girl and looks into her eyes as the ship sinks, then wakes up on the same day on a very different ship with a roommate who claims that they have been on that ship since its debarkation, and that his fiancée, the young girl who drowned in our narrator's visions, took a different ship to rendezvous later because of the displeasure of her adopted parents over the relationship. It seems that the lost, probably drowned, girl is the daughter of a man of the same name as our narrator from a branch of his family that settled in the South of the United States, unknown to him. Thus, their familial kinship created the "Psychic Shipwreck" that allowed him to experience her final voyage in his visions. Whether or not he was ever there is unclear, though the made up quote from Denneker's meditation would seem to indicate it is a drawing together of the "soul" rather than the body.

In the trading book game in "Silhouette", in which the books are contained under small covers and seem to be palm sized storage devices (like an extremely limited flash drive), several other works are mentioned, including Isak Dinesen's **Seven Gothic Tales** and Thornton Wilder's **The Eighth Day** as well as GK Chesterton's collection of poems, **The Wild Knight**.

The portions of **The Wild Knight** quoted are:

My eyes are full of lonely mirth:

Reeling with want and worn with scars,

For pride of every stone on Earth,

I shake my spear at all the stars.

In a science fictional way, this indicates that though damaged and broken, humanity has turned its derision and angst towards the heavens and the galaxies outside its origin point. However, settling on the planet in the Algol system would almost certainly be a mistake, though the Captain wants to settle there so they can then return to Earth, which has been damaged probably beyond repair.

A live bat beats my crest above,

Lean foxes nose where I have trod,

And on my naked face the love

Which is the loneliness of God.

The figure which accompanies these verses is characterized by anger and restrained power. Here, love involves loneliness, and Johann turns the ship away from the planet, distancing

humanity from a landlocked planetary existence but dooming it to the loneliness of space.

These verses are from the poem "The World's Lover", the speaker a supposed sorcerer who is cursed for mentioning that the leaves are green (reveling in the natural world), and is then scourged by thorns and whipped, and the people call to crucify him, praising the Lord — he is killed and becomes food for the vultures. (Soon Johann is cut along his arms and legs and his head bruised from his transportation to the planet right after reading the poem). Note that the final action of Johann is to turn away from the world, and he seems to believe that living on planets is an anomaly.

The storm motif is present in a few scenes. When Johann is with the Captain and discussing the constructed Pleasureworld, actually made from excrement, he thinks of a storm attacking a jetty, and in the very end he knows that land is the enemy during a storm. The other texts mentioned deal with storms and ships quite directly, and Erik's report deals with a rather disturbing implication to the seas of Neuerddraht:

"There are piers jutting out into the sea — piers for the ships, that the sand surges against. I went out onto one of them — the stones are still solid enough, though they're not really stones, and stood at the end, and I swear to you, Lieutenant the ocean that isn't within a thousand kilometers of here washed over my feet and the sand blew and sang so I my ears that I nearly fell, almost fell off the end of it as I stood there looking out into the ocean with the unwall'd houses all behind me and the ships beating their gongs in the rain out there in the whirling bay."

Where is Erik experiencing this? What has happened to the creatures that lived in these houses?

Thornton Wilder's **The Eighth Day**, which is, according to the author, about "evolution — Man evolving and individuals evolving (and back sliding!)?, is clearly relevant — the novel was originally designed around Goethe's poem "Tyche" and still quotes Goethe several times "Beware what you long for in youth, for you will get it in your middle age." In addition, we have a murder where the suspect, though innocent, is forced to relocate his entire existence in escaping "justice" — eventually, he will drown at sea. In addition, one of the character's joins a church combining spiritism, Indian philosophy, and healing that "seemed to her to reflect many ideas, many affirmations, that she had acquired from her lifelong reading in Goethe."

In **Seven Gothic Tales**, it is quite clear what appeals to Wolfe: characters in costume and in disguise, telling stories within stories, but there are a few specific references that directly tie the work to the German future of "Silhouette". The first story involves rising waters and flooding threatening to drown a group of people from a variety of classes stuck together, including a supposed Cardinal. The cardinal speaks of sanctity and how only in context with everything else does any particular thing become sacred, before this quote:

"All their shadows, thrown away in the circle from the center of the stable lamp, reached up to the rafters under the roof. In the course of the night it often seemed as if it were these long shadows which were really alive, and which kept up the spirit and the talk of the gathering, behind the exhausted people" (Dinesen). After this point they share a meal much like the last supper and the cardinal faints, and when he awakens he is far weaker, but it seems that leadership and strength transfers somehow to another character almost symbiotically. In addition these characters are not who they seem — the bishop is merely someone who pretends to be him and who in fact murdered the original bishop, and is actually illegitimate royalty. They will all drown in the terrible deluge brought on by the storm, regardless.

The second story bears two portions that would be irresistible to Wolfe, concerning a married couple and their extra-marital explorations "Before I had ever met her I had read about her family, whose name ran down for centuries through the history of France, and learned that there used to be werewolves amongst them, and I sometimes thought that I should have been happier to see her really go down on all four and snarl at me, for then I should have known where I was."

An even more explicit reference to Faust may be found: "And in the air there was a theory, which caught hold of them there, that the jealousy of lovers was an ignoble affair, and that no woman should allow herself to be possessed by any male but the devil. On their way to him they were proud of being, according to Doctor Faust, always a hundred steps ahead of man. But the jealousy of competition was, as between Adam and Lilith, a noble striving."

No doubt this idea of male and female relationships plays out with Johann and Grit, with a very similar interplay, though the coupling with the Captain seems to mirror this competition between Adam and Lilith. The *Seven Gothic Stories* mention Goethe several times. The final story, "The Poet", involves a story of a man obsessed with poetry and mentions Goethe at least four or five times as an ideal.

Here is a brief analysis of the names in the text.

Johann: while it means "God is merciful" and the last name Faust means "fortunate", its meaning connotes less than the story Wolfe references.

Grit - the short underclass girl in whom Johann seems most interested, is a name clearly derived from Margeret (child of light). Her birth name was Joan, "gift from God."

Gretchen- the name means pearl, but it is a pet form of the name Margaret.

Gerta- (an alternate spelling could be Gerda) could mean protection. Of special note is that this name sounds almost exactly like the proper phonetic pronunciation of the word Goethe to an English speaker. While the goddess Gerda might be invoked, it is also conceivable that Girta is a derivative of Margaret.

Marcella- Johann imagines Marcella when the "drug bug" is employed in his mandatory tryst with the captain. (Marcella implies strong and war-like, and at the beginning of the text Emil mentioned that Johann wanted to be a captain but "with the war over it wasn't likely ever to happen" so Johann joined the expedition.)

Emil — the male shipmate who begs Johann to call him Grit in one of the most unique scenes in Wolfe, could be named after Emil Ludwig, who is responsible for recovering Goethe's remains and also wrote lengthy biographies of both Goethe — and Napoleon, which Wolfe references in *Peace* as the source of Weer's off color comments about Napoleon's hand.

Helmut — Johann envies him for the affection he believes Grit harbors for him, though she later claims Johann is more handsome. His name means "Brave", and he has been on the planet, but returns to the ship. Johann kills him and he is then used by the overmonitor as an image to keep hope among its followers alive.

Horst — his name means wood or thicket, man of the forest.

Rudi — one of the mutinous spiritual conspirators who Grit is sorry to see Johann mixed up with,

he is bald and his name means “famed wolf”. His day job involves the hydroponic plants (plant engineering?) Hmmmm.

QUANTA OF TIME:

Forgive me in advance — my scientific training is in biological sciences, not truly in physics.

The overmonitors discussion as time consisting of quanta, or units, seems to deal with Planck and his observations of black body radiation which lead him to posit that light and other electromagnetic energy are emitted in discrete packets of energy. Planck showed that nature is discontinuous and discrete, made up of small units. Here, the relationship between velocity and time is being explored as an aspect of those quanta or units and their speeds. I am not certain that time is actually composed of quanta, though we can measure its passage relativistically.

In physics everything can display a wavelength, and here the wavelength of Johann and other individuals is manifesting a discontinuous presence, perhaps manifesting as real from that wavelength. I am not entirely certain how sound the physics of this section is, especially when the monitor begins talking about hyper-time, but interestingly enough the characters do seem to have an energy valence in the story (Grit and Gerta are similar in Johann's attraction to them and interchangeable as yeoman of the watch, but it is clear that Gerta is higher in valence, both derived from Faust's Margaret) and I feel that Planck's work with black body radiation is somehow important to the science behind these Silhouettes, given the light from Algol and its unusual ultraviolet rays, coupled to its dark twin. I feel that the shadows are composed of cellular quanta which might even conglomerate into a colony, leading us to our next section, where I feel much more comfortable.

COLONIES OF CELLS

In addition to the ships rearrangement being amorphous, it is directly compared to a bacterial structure: Gerta says, “Ugly, isn't it — With all those loops and ravel’s” I think this ship out to be long and slender and graceful — like the Captain, if you know what I mean. This one looks like a bacterial nucleus under a microscope. The idea of the ship itself as an amorphous nucleus gives the metaphor at work in the novella a large frame of reference. Algol compared to a distant beating heart could be another such huge multi-celled organ system.

Helmut also reveals why the breathing apparatuses are necessary on the planet: it is clear that Karl has been doing studies on the bacteria on the planet: “The airborne bacteria. If they can show they don't infect human beings, or cook up a vaccine, we won't have to wear the things. You wouldn't think there would be such a stew of single-celled organisms floating around in a place that's as dry as that one, but there are.” These organisms flourished in the water garden Johann visited during one of his apportations.

In regards to the thought of apportionation, Johann records into his voisriit: ?Offhand, it would seem impossible that the living body could be dissolved in one place and recondensed in another without a fatal disruption of its functions; but the body is only an immense community of microorganisms, each, as has been known for hundreds of years, capable of existing and reproducing, in a satisfactory environment, without reference to the rest. The personality, which conceives of itself as existing without interruption from birth to death, has no physical reality, since no cell of the body endures for more than half a dozen years. Rather it is like the spirit of some long continued enterprise, which survives the extinction of generations ... Thus, apportionation, the constantly shifting ship, and the shadow cells that can flee from one shadow to another but maintain a personality, which might conceivably have the demon star Algol as their heart and command center (or even Algol's dark shadow companion, if they flee the light of

Algol), show organisms as amorphous collections of smaller cells.

METAMORPHOSIS OF PLANTS

In addition to the Faustian echoes in "Silhouette", I believe the story explicitly references Goethe's scientific treatise on plants, which dealt with three basic principles.

1.

unity of form in diverse structures, such that every aspect of the plant was simply a metamorphosis of the leaf. Goethe called the leaf "The true Proteus who can hide or reveal himself in all vegetal forms."

2.

refinement of sap: the idea that the movement of sap from low to high places was almost an act of purification, such that lowly tubers were mired in filth and the flowers of the plant pointed ever heavenward.

3.

Expansion and contraction in cycles: Goethe posited that plants developed in 3 basic cycles of contraction, visible in meristem ontogeny.

"Silhouette" is in many ways symbolically related to the early Wolfe story "Morning Glory", in which the mutated plant seeks to find the true light outside its petty container, mocking the artificial university knowledge as almost an institution devoid of true light. Here, the plants on Neuerddraht flee the light of their sun (note that this resonates with the refinement of sap: struggling to reach further into the earth, the true light of the winking demon binary system is too damaging). There is no refinement of sap: they struggle to go ever lower, like mankind, grounding itself and fleeing the celestial, as the captain wants them to set down on a planet ill suited to their survival.

The ship also seems to have the unlimited metamorphic quality of a leaf: it changes positions and expands and contracts almost randomly, according to some unknown purpose, made of ice foam that seems like the cell walls found in plants. The shadows colonies which communicate with Johann are equally amorphous.

At the end of the novella, Johann, who finally achieves the captaincy he was reputed to covet, turns the ship into space and away from the grounding of Neuerddraht, or "New earth wire" - which could be taken electrically as well as a ground wire.

In addition, the formlessness of the ship, with no gravity, also seems to be a symbol of aimlessness. No sexual identity, no gravity, and no authority. Johann gives voice to these modernist fears directly: "Look back five hundred years [note that Goethe would have lived about 450 years before the time Johann is subjectively speaking in]. Everything valued then is dead now beauty in architecture and language — freedom — the family, kinship, the tribe — all the relationships of blood, all dead. Religion, the dream of objective justice, the very ideas of a garden and a forest — all dead." To which his visitor, Heinz, replies, "Religion isn't dead — I was a diabolist back on earth."

If mysticism survives, it is corrupt, as are all the institutions. Ironically, man has left a destitute earth and, seeking a new world, has found the Algol system. Pleasureworld, a false paradise, is actually made from excrement, and in space the urine of the passengers is recycled as water — the entire ship is infested with flabby rats. The drug bugs that increase sexual pleasure are

nothing but modified crab lice, an infestation. Humanity seems to have lost its way.

ALGOL:

The star has a bad reputation. "It causes misfortune, violence, decapitation, hanging, electrocution and mob violence, and gives a dogged and violent nature that causes death to the native or others. It is the most evil star in the heavens." (Robson). If this is the beating heart of the shadowy cellular conglomeration organism in contact with Johann, then the alliance between man and silhouette might be more diabolic than it first appeared.

Algol, the winking demon, is a binary star composed of two stars that were long considered to be one, a light and dark binary unit, with a prominent place in astrology as an "evil" constellation, it does seem that nothing good can come of man stopping here. Traditionally, Algol is part of the Gorgon's head held by Perseus in the constellation. Since the gorgon could not be looked upon without the observer turning to stone, it is interesting that "vision" plays such a part in the ability of the silhouette following Johann to speak only when he is not being looked at directly.

Indeed, there is a scene in which Johann is on the planet and sees Algol in the sky. Only some time after the sun sets and complete darkness returns does he begin to hear his Silhouette speaking again. For this reason, and with the image of Algol with its dark shadow sun throbbing like a heart in space, there is at least a chance that the being which has been summoned into collective existence might even be the demon star itself — a colony of cells that maintain separate existence but group consciousness. Johann's thoughts on apportionment presage this (though it is of course possible that the cells making up his Silhouette are not actually connected to Algol).

Additionally, the name of our main character, Johann, with even explicit mention of "Goethe's friend" and apportionment must also make us consider the connotation of the *Faust* story (the historical story referenced runs that Goethe and his friend saw a man named Frederick in his nightgown on the street in Weimar, who was actually asleep at the time in Goethe's house, visiting from Frankfurt and as yet unknown to Goethe. Frederick also claimed to have had a dream of Goethe in Weimar). Goethe also claims to have seen a vision of his future self riding in the woods on horseback only to realize eight years later that he was riding in the same suit of clothes as he saw himself those many years ago.

THE SHADOW:

It is likely that Johann's shadow colony appears from the very first page, the reason for the failing light in his chamber, which no diagnostic test seems to be able to detect. These are probably the bacteria and organisms Karl is testing on, running free, unsure that they will ever be able to return to their home until Johann takes them with him in his apportionment. The shadow spreads from one wall to cover another, and eventually it joins Johann's shadow, making its pact with him. It saves his life several times, and he also spreads something of its aegis to Grit. I believe it is related to the bacteria being studied by Karl from the planet - they share the photophobic nature of the rest of life on the planet, hiding in the shadows. Algol and its dark twin might mirror Johann and his Silhouette and their connection, but it is conceivable that the binary star also has something to do with the consciousness of the shadow. Eventually the light in Johann's chamber will begin working of its own accord, after the entity or shadow colony has taken up full residence in Johann's own shadow. It is unclear whether Johann leaves his shadow behind in the hydroponics plant or not, and if it leaves with the escape tender holding the Captain and Gerta.

SETTING AND SEXUALITY:

The action occurs on June 5th, 2214, according to the relative flow of time on the ship, which has been on its mission for 17 years, though it seems that relativistic speeds would make the actual date on earth about 2500 or even later. Johann wonders why there has been no apportionment since

2150. The only relevance to the date June 5th that I could find is that it is the feast day of St. Boniface, who is the patron saint of Germany and the "Apostle of the Germans" (and was credited with the first Christmas Tree in some stories). There is every indication that there was a war, and that birth names like "Joan" are old fashioned and unused, but German names are in vogue.

Class identities are extremely stratified and reinforced by nutrition and even height — the female Captain is taller than Johann and towers over Grit. Johann requests Grit's sexual presence as often as he is permitted, and the female Captain seems to be able to call upon lower class males as well. However, there is no indication that males can call other males of lower class to serve their sexual desires (or it could be that Emil is in a lower caste than Johann, or he might) in this class set up, though bisexual encounters are quite common.

Wolfe has of course examined class relationships and even prostitution before, but in this is the first truly foreign system we see in his fiction, where every six weeks you can "force" someone from a lower caste to serve you sexually, which they can only refuse in light of some form of illness.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: With the planet's photophobic plants and the ominous "winking demon" double star, shadowy twins, does the alliance between Johann and his silhouette represent a Faustian bargain? Johann is not a diabolist as several of the other crew members are (it seems the last vestige of religious sentiment lies in "perversions" of religion) but he does seize power at the end and Grit simply vanishes, as Gretchen refuses to leave her prison in *Faust*.

Even though the overmonitor is called God at one point, does it necessarily imply that it is a false one to be avoided, especially considering it is complicit in the rebellion against the captain and the creating the image of Helmut after he is dead?

When Johann says that he will not consult the over-monitor, is this hubris or a return to genuine human capability without reliance on the artificial? Is he just "the right man for the job" - a war-time/stormy weather captain? (Note that his ideal woman, whom he left behind, Marcella, has a name which means martial or warlike).

Is Johann's seizing of power a moment of salvation or damnation for him? Clearly it will save the ship.

Regarding the ancient civilization on the planet with houses and an ominous stormy sea in Erik's description — are the shadows a remnant of that civilization or responsible for its disappearance? The name of Algol with all its negative connotations might have some impact on our answer.

SETTING AND CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER WORKS:

Johann uses the voisriit transcriber explicitly mentioned in "The Blue Mouse" and "Monster" (in this work its black boxy description also seems to match the description of the black box

Cutthroat speaks into in "Tracking Song")? but there is one other thing I wanted to mention. For an author accused of sexist caricatures of women all the time, there is a brief little section in Wolfe's career where it looks like his future world is run by women in what could almost be a dialogue with James Tiptree, Jr.

These include "In Looking Glass Castle" (men are pretty much outlawed), "Many Mansions" (the female being spoken to is a clone grown in a test tube, as it is hinted all of her sisters are, but there is no mention of brothers or men at all in the "victorious" faction of humanity), "The Eyeflash Miracles" (the security guards who kick them off the train are women, and I believe there is a female authority figure referenced in the work), and in "Silhouette" the height and power of the captain, as well as the statement that Johann was unlikely to ever be promoted to Captain after the war ended, at least hints that gender relationships in this caste system are very complicated (However, it may very well be that it is purely caste in nature and does not recognize any kind of gender distinction [the ubiquitous bisexuality on board might also hint at this attitude]). This also occurs in *There Are Doors,* but that is closer to fantasy than SF and has a different kind of biological explanation. The most dystopian of these for sympathetic characters is probably "The Eyeflash Miracles".

The overmonitor and a long ship life of course remind us of the fragmentation of Pas on the Whorl as well as the ship in "The Other Dead Man". Johann has the infamous crushed leg so prevalent in Wolfe's long fiction, but here there is a slight echo of Marlowe's Faustus, where someone pulls on Faustus' leg to wake him and it comes off in their hands.

The strange shadows and plants on the planet in "Silhouette" definitely remind us of the trees and Shadow Children in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, and perhaps even the Vanished People of Short Sun, yet I feel that these plants are slightly different. They flee the light, and in that regard I am reminded of the wonderful modernist work "Morning Glory", in which the dream plant scours endless corridors to seek out true light. In the short story "The Blue Mouse", there is some mention of dark strangers hungry for blood, but the time line would not seem to allow those visitors to be from Neuerddraht. Here, the true light of Algol is damaging, and the plants instinctively hide from it. Even the Silhouette which speaks to Johann can only do so when he is hidden from sight. This concealment from visibility is a very interesting motif, and I am still wondering if the consciousness is entirely colonial in nature, with Algol as its heart, or if the cells necessarily flee Algol's light and are actually antithetical to it.

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Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Faust.*

Robson, Vivian E. *Fixed Stars and Constellations in Astrology.*

Wilder, Thornton. *The Eighth Day.*

Marc Aramini — 29 Jul 2014, 06:25 · follows Marc Aramini

As I said, if there is any physicist who can help with the time quanta paragraph, that would be great. It seems that the overmonitor is saying existence is dependent on the emission of time

quanta, and as such that discontinuous but "real" existence can spring up wherever the wave function of a body travels as long as a time quanta is emitted at that point. Right?

The relationship between Algol's light wavelength on other quanta might also prove interesting to think about, or, conversely, a waste of time ... I'm really not sure.

Marc Aramini — 29 Jul 2014, 11:57 · follows Marc Aramini

The rather hallucinatory scene where Erik believes he has come to the middle of the Ocean standing on a pier seems to me one of the most important thematic repetitions in the story, for the referenced works involve memorable drowning and storms: A Psychological Shipwreck, The Eighth Day, and Seven Gothic Tales all have very prominent flooding storm scenes, and at the conclusion Johann's belief that land is the enemy during a storm gives us some metaphor for this ... however, when he sits with the Captain, he remembers several things: writing Marcella as he passes Neptune, then an actual representation of the sea god, and then a strange italicized stormy moment involving a jetty that has very little context.

Are we to believe that the microorganisms rife in the watery crevasses are a part of this storm, or, because he thinks of last writing Marcella near Neptune, should we consider this somehow indicative of the fate of earth, which somehow manifests itself around Erik as well (experiencing the psychological shipwreck/drowning of his friends long gone on earth)? Given the apportation that has begun, I don't see why Erik couldn't be standing in the ocean on Neuerddraht - thought the talk of time and hyper-time quanta by the overmonitor is confusing.

Marc Aramini — 29 Jul 2014, 12:14 · follows Marc Aramini

On looking at Grit's disappearance again, it seems that she actually has gone to get the escape tender and bring it to the hydroponic jungle for the Captain and Johann so that the overmonitor cannot stop their escape. However, there is no mention of her in the escape pod when they open it, and this is a bit disorienting. Is she there at all when it is jettisoned?

Gerry Quinn — 29 Jul 2014, 18:00 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 29/07/2014 07:25, Marc Aramini wrote:

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She teleported away (with the help of her shadow, obviously) as they were walking to the escape pod. Only Johann and Gerta noticed. They send the Captain and Elis off to NeuerDraht; presumably Grit is somewhere on the ship, or on the planet but with the ability to teleport back.

- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 29 Jul 2014, 19:59 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Yes I realized grit went to bring the escape pod to the hydroponic module, but it isn't clear if she is in it at the end.

Do time quanta exist? Light certainly emits photons, and the history of black body radiation made me wonder if the shadow and Algol were being brought into this discussion of time and velocity thematically. Perhaps in a pseudoscientific and impossible reversal, when the shadow is seen it must emit a wavelength at the speed of light, because the observer sees it. At those speeds it cannot act inside time. when unseen, sublight speed quanta can be emitted in time to allow communication, but that's all pseudoscience trying to explain why they can't talk when seen, and assuming that observation actually prompts a waveform emission at the speed of light rather than simply existing in the first place (almost like the observer fixes them in place). The Gorgon's head of Algol might be just as useful an explanation.

On Tuesday, July 29, 2014, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com
<javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','gerry at bindweed.com');>> wrote:

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 29 Jul 2014, 20:03 · in reply to Marc Aramini

"Do time quanta exist?"

Whether spacetime is quantified is a gritty problem. Superstring theory seems to say yes, but superstring theory is, shall we say, far from proven.

On Tue, Jul 29, 2014 at 12:59 PM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:

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- Gerry Quinn

Paul Zinn-Justin — 29 Jul 2014, 20:47 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Tue, Jul 29, 2014 at 10:03 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

"Do time quanta exist?"

Whether spacetime is quantified is a gritty problem. Superstring theory seems to say yes, but superstring theory is, shall we say, far from proven.

I think the word you're looking for is "quantized". according to quantum mechanics, everything should be quantized, but the theory that describes spacetime on all scales (Einstein's theory of general relativity) doesn't get along very well with quantum mechanics, hence various speculative theories (such as superstrings) to reconcile them. It doesn't mean that the geometry of spacetime should be thought of as discrete in nature (as opposite to continuous), but rather that its geometry at short distances becomes a bit fuzzy, essentially quantum in nature.

that being said, I haven't read the short story, so I'll stop my digression here.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 29 Jul 2014, 20:52 · in reply to Paul Zinn-Justin

Paul - you are, of course, correct about "quantized." My bad. And the rest is well said.

On Tue, Jul 29, 2014 at 1:47 PM, Paul Zinn-Justin <pzinnjustin at gmail.com> wrote:

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Dave Lebling — 29 Jul 2014, 23:08 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

From my viewpoint, I would say that the idea that time is quantized is a perfectly reasonable SF supposition, given that it has been a postulated theory of physics for quite a long time. In fact, lots of ideas that were current in physics when the story was written are now pretty much dead parrots, but this parrot is still more or less alive. (At least until you look at it and determine whether it's alive or dead.)

Dave Lebling

On 7/29/2014 4:52 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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