

Short Story 78*: A Criminal Proceeding

The Urth list — 6 messages, 2 voices, 01 Aug 2014

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6592>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Marc Aramini — 01 Aug 2014, 14:07

*We will return to the few long novellas I skipped soon from the 70s - I have saved a space in the numbering and am working on completing them.

"A Criminal Proceeding" first appeared in *Interfaces* in 1980.

SUMMARY:

Late at night on Good Friday, Stephen Brodie is arrested by New York and Philadelphia police, the secret service, FBI, and others, with news coverage. With that live coverage, it becomes a ridiculous spectacle. Rumors cause mobs, and jury selection begins on November 17th with 300,000 watching. Jurors are selected from a pool of 5,000 by March of the following year, with concessions made for interest groups such as the "male-grocer-Oriental-American community".

There are riots in January and February. The first justice, Frederic K.C. McGrail, orders a recess while the Bronco stadium is equipped to handle the trial. The following year, the trial begins. 336,781 seats were left open for an audience after all of the essential and media personnel. Further absurd delays ensue, and the government's case eventually begins on May 31st by Eli Braincreek. Mention is made of a private yacht chartered by Antropopos armed with heat-seeking underwater projectiles, and audiences grow to over 30 million watchers. An act attempts to make some of the charges brought up against Brodie ones with a mandatory death penalty, and the female president signs it. Brodie attempts suicide using strips torn from his shirt and slashes his wrist with fragments of his artificial eye, and as the trial continues events become increasingly absurd, involving bombings and bringing in even UN officers, with several stating Brodie had hoped to gain world-wide control "on or before the occasion of the U.S.S.A debacle". When Brodie finally takes the stand in his own defense, he thrusts his hand into the divine fire and swears his innocence and the Mosque of Omar collapses, the last wall of Solomon falls, and a voice calling out "Pan is reborn!" is heard near the Isles of Paxi.

The account ends with the ominous, "I believe it is safe to say that all of us felt then that the real prosecution had not yet begun."

Discussion:

The Wolfe-wiki says "Brodie is arrested on Good Friday, which is surely an intentional reference to Christ's crucifixion. While Christ's trial shares some absurd qualities (notably the unruly crowd) with the trial depicted in this story, Christ was arrested on the Thursday prior to Easter Sunday, according to Christian scripture, so Brodie is not a Christ figure per se. The presiding judge's name (McGrail) could be Christian reference, however."

Which is flirting with the point but misses it: On Good Friday, Christ dies and actually goes to Hell. We are in the harrowing of Hell, and it is not Brodie alone, but everyone who watches it and becomes embroiled in it, who falls victim to the spectacle. There will be no Easter Sunday

and redemption in this interminable trial. All the absurdity with its psuedo-realistic detail is like a demonic farce, and finally, at the end, the mosque collapses, the temple falls, and Pan is reborn — the pagan festivities and the bachannalian revelries have come to life, where so much effort and money is spent on a farce for entertainment, the moral center and the restrained religious sentiment of non-pagan religions is lost. There is no redemption, just excess and spectacle.

The media and movies, like the “sly spy movies”, actually influence the testimony of women with code names and prompts increasingly ridiculous and asinine testimonies. Much like “The War Beneath the Tree”, the real meaning of what is transpiring is missing, justice and crime are almost unimportant, but the glitzy sham trial consumes the world’s attention. Note that Pan died when Christ was born, and here, the death of morality, restraint, propriety, and reason prompts the return of pagan values — Pan returns, in all his excess, and the zeitgeist of Christ, Judaism, and Islam dies. The Mosque of Omar is the oldest and only mosque in Bethlehem. We see Solomon’s Temple fall forever, the traditional keeping place of the ark of the covenant lost. Mention is made of the U.S.S.A. debacle, which probably is hinting at the attempt and failure of socialism for the United States.

The adjective which describes the proceeding actually does describe it: this proceeding is criminal in its excess. The prosecution of the people involved, whose society is so ridiculous, has not yet begun.

NAMES AND DATES:

While I don’t think there is much of any significance to the majority of these names and dates, save possibly in identifying a few religious feast days. The final date, when Brodie puts his hand into the divine flame, might actually be on Maundy Thursday. Since events and testimonies are supposed to seem random and designed to be absurd, let’s look at a few selected examples just for the sake of completion.

Good Friday at 11:43 PM: Stephen Brodie arrested. (Christ dies and descends to hell).

November 5: rumor that the trial would begin on November 6th instead of 7th causes mob

November 17, a Monday: jury selection begins

November 20, Thursday: first juror selected

March 16: Jury selection complete — This is the first day of the Bacchanalia in Roman history!!

May 3 of the following year: arena prepared and trial begins, opening motion delays trial (lots of events in history, but the only feast day that might possibly apply is that of Antonia and Alexander — she was forced to work in a brothel for refusing to marry, and the Christian soldier came in and traded clothes with her to allow her to escape — both executed by being burned alive)

May 31 trial reconvenes (May only has 30 days), Braincreek begins government case (Feast of Saint Hermias involves a Roman soldier who confessed Christ and was tortured and cast into a flame which did not burn him)

June 20th — testimony of Ethel Saltzlust and gesture towards Ella Moneypenny-Hubert made (earliest possible date of the solstice, also the feast of Summanus in Rome, the nocturnal god of thunder)

June 25th: governments? case ends

September: Perkins-O'Farrell act considered

October 31st: Female president signs the bill with death penalty, Brodie attempts suicide — this is Halloween — an explicitly pagan remembrance — interesting that this date consigns Brodie to death if he is found guilty.

Two weeks before Christmas: the girls with pseudonyms take the stand against Brodie and the UN involvement on a guided missile carrier called the *Mayaguez Incident* is mentioned. (The Mayaguez incident was the last official battle of the Vietnam War, when the Khmer Rouge seized the SS Mayaguez)

Ten day recess — 17,000 people are injured by Scholla mausoleum flamethrowers

January 25th — trial reopens, but closes again when bombed.

February 14th- Brodie pleads guilty to several charges and not guilty by reason of insanity to others. Valentine's Day — named after a martyr who died on the Via Flaminia.

Mid-march- Prosecution completes case.

March 24th: Brodie takes the stand and casts his hand into the divine flame, proclaiming his innocence. None of the feast days seemed to resonate very well with this date. The trial spans almost 3 years. This is certainly during Lent, however, and it may be possible to determine the day of the week if one were so inclined — I believe it would fall on a Thursday, and could be an extremely early candidate for Maundy Thursday (Easter is set by its relationship to the Pascal Moon) — and instead of Christ being seized for trial, it is the world.

Stephen Brodie: Stephan means "wreath, crown, honor, or reward", Brodie cane mean "ditch" or ?mire? ? I think we see honor and the crown dragged into a ditch in these proceedings.

Justice Frederic McGrail, Hopkins, and Justice Russell? the last name McGrail actually comes from the personal name Niall, but I do think the changing names of the justices, which will also include a Russell, which can imply red, are meant to be part of a pattern — renowned blood spilled, held in a cup, in light of the symbolic death of all Christian values and common sense in the spectacle — a return to cathartic paganism.

Eli Braincreek- the chief prosecutor for the government, in light of the good Friday arrest we should probably consider Jesus? use of "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani" on the cross. The second name, Braincreek, shows where everyone's brains are. His mention of "Antropopos" might mean something closer to poop-man instead of the more common name for Christ, the Theanthropos (God-man).

Ridiculous names like Ethel Saltzlust and the pseudonyms are rather obvious in their over-dramatization (lust and bitterness intertwined).

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: Since this is an intentional exaggeration and satire, probably the whole point is that Brodie's crime is never mentioned. But — what was Brodie arrested for?

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

Wolfe's absurd satires are actually pretty rare, though I feel "Forlesen" is a much more serious and realistic satirical look at society. I feel like the attempts at humor leave it with something in common with "From the Desk of Gilmer C. Merton" and the very rare but also ultimately funny "Planetarium in Orbit". For those interested, there is a female president — of course, we are metaphorically in hell throughout the story.

Wolfe's comments on the story: 'A Criminal Proceeding' is just my impression of real-life courtroom drama as it's presented in the popular press. When I read one of these things, usually while buttering yet another slice of toast, I never know who anyone is or what the person on trial is supposed to have done. Do you?"

Robert Pirkola — 25 Aug 2014, 16:04 · follows Marc Aramini

Marc Aramini wrote on Aug 1, 2014: "May 31 trial reconvenes (May only has 30 days):"

Actually May does have 31 days. Was there something in the story saying the number was different?

Marc Aramini — 25 Aug 2014, 16:36 · in reply to Robert Pirkola

forgot to edit that out I guess. thought I caught it.

On Mon, Aug 25, 2014 at 9:04 AM, Robert Pirkola <rpirkola at hotmail.com> wrote:

Marc Aramini wrote on Aug 1, 2014: "May 31 trial reconvenes (May only has 30 days):"

Actually May does have 31 days. Was there something in the story saying the number was different?

Marc Aramini — 25 Aug 2014, 16:37 · in reply to Marc Aramini

there is an old saying 30 days has September april something and November and when I was writing it I messed up the third month as May, then thought I edited it out when I looked at a calendar. Dumb mistake. June, right?

On Mon, Aug 25, 2014 at 9:36 AM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:
forgot to edit that out I guess. thought I caught it.

On Mon, Aug 25, 2014 at 9:04 AM, Robert Pirkola <rpirkola at hotmail.com> wrote:

Marc Aramini wrote on Aug 1, 2014: "May 31 trial reconvenes (May only has 30 days):"

Actually May does have 31 days. Was there something in the story saying the number was different?

Robert Pirkola — 25 Aug 2014, 18:59 · follows Marc Aramini

I have never been terribly good at remembering such things myself. That coupled with the fact that one never knows in sf if common facts are being tweaked for narrative purposes, so when I read that in your commentary I went back to the story and couldn't find anything in there and so on and so on. Just clarifying for the sake of the posters in posterity.

Marc Aramini — 25 Aug 2014, 20:10 · in reply to Robert Pirkola

No problem, I appreciate your close reading. I was on the lookout for things like the House of 31 February and got overzealous. I am glad you are reading them over! My pace has accelerated lately so I am bound to make some mistakes that need editing and rethinking.

Waiting for a primary source to arrive in the mail with the Philip Rahv essay mentioned in "My Book" and I will finish up the write up on Redwood Coast Roamer/Four Wolves as one entry, do an entry on Bibliomen, the four novellas I skipped in the 70s (two of which are going to be a bit of a nightmare), a New Sun Essay which I probably won't post on the list, and I will be halfway through. Quite a relief. Anything you notice please bring it to our attention.

Wolfe's short fiction in the 90s seems unusually difficult after the relative "lightness" of most of the work in the 80s, but he was not as prolific in that decade. After Short Sun I think his short fiction became somewhat easier and more thematic again, with a few notable exceptions that approach his most difficult work.

On Mon, Aug 25, 2014 at 11:59 AM, Robert Pirkola <rpirkola at hotmail.com> wrote:

I have never been terribly good at remembering such things myself. That coupled with the fact that one never knows in sf if common facts are being tweaked for narrative purposes, so when I read that in your commentary I went back to the story and couldn't find anything in there and so on and so on. Just clarifying for the sake of the posters in posterity.
