

Short Story 121: Alphabet

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 21 Apr 2015

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Marc Aramini — 21 Apr 2015, 15:41

"Alphabet" first appeared in *Fiction International* in 1988 and is collected in *Storeys from the Old Hotel.*

SUMMARY:

The story begins, "The pet held up a dead snake, then laid it on the stony hillside belly down, carefully arranging it in a full sine curve while making a noise like a leaky valve." The being to which it offers the snake praises the beauty of the reptile and the bravery of the "pet", though once again, the pet responds by making the "S" sound.

The point of view character, identified as "he", once again praises the pet for bringing the snake and a "flap-winged flier" (which no doubt formed a "V", or less likely, a "Y" shape), begging, "Now be still, if you will not learn. I want to write," though he really doesn't feel like writing.

"When he closed all his eyes, he saw the flaw that had brought him to this insane world where life ran riot, saw the flaw hanging like a pink haze in space." When he opens his eyes, the pet is reaching for his "pen". He "thinks" a large, horned beast at the pet, which recoils, "its face losing its hairy brownness for the hue of dried mud." He instructs it to never touch the pen, using it to scrawl "many-colored wingless reptile" on a boulder, which makes the stone run in smoking streams.

He turns away and, "without in the least willing it, sought the cliff of the message," where he had left the words meant to describe who he is and what has happened to him in his exile, asking the pet if it even begins to understand reading. The pet scrawls an "S" on the boulder as it hisses.

"No, that is not a word, that little drawing of yours. That is a picture, a picture of a reptile." He once again sends his thoughts to the pet in the form of a herd of the horned beasts below. He realizes he should eat, and looks over the multicolored fruits, the animals the pet had brought, as well as a root "the pet had bitten to show that it was good."

The exiled being realizes there is little point in eating now as he succumbs to despair, thinking that his pet has become better trained, but that it only resulted in "the perfection of the means — the decay of the end." He studies the cliff again, which contains his "name-colony-name" and details of the "pink flaw" which he equates to the "hand of the god" in his mind, which separated him from the communion he shared with his "brother-sisters" and their "circular marching of joy". He reflects that in his language isolated and fool where the same character reversed, and that looking at his message, others would see "fool" to describe his condition. "The millions of minds his own mind had once touched, the countless intelligences he had nearly though his own, were gone." He succumbs to despair and writes no more.

The pet brings a red and a green fruit to the being with daylight, and he choses the red one and

takes a bite, at which the pet rejoices. To him, it lacks all taste. The pet continues to scratch at his boulder, and the exile thinks sarcastically, "You will communicate with me yet. Of course you will," though of course this is what the pet is actually trying to do. He looks at the "A" figure which the pet has scratched, saying "Aaaah!?"

"Now what do you think you are doing?" The pet capers and dances, and shows that he is trying to represent the bulls down below. When the exile realizes that the pet is seeking to represent the bulls below, he indicates that it is upside down. The pet turns over to show that he is representing a dead bull.

"Dead. Yes, I understand now — the horned beasts are dead. Your god will not make them anymore. — You are right, and wiser than I." The being realizes it has been trying to write in the wrong place: "He had known if for so long, but now it could not be pushed away. He put the point of his pen to his head and began the first character."

The pet does not notice his fall or "the silver rattle of his pen on the stones" because "it was drawing the dead bull, and drawing it made the pet feel strong — it imagined itself a great bull, a bull strong enough to push down the whole cliff, the cliff topped with the strange, angular lines that had once been of fire."

COMMENTARY:

On the surface level Wolfe's story explores the manner in which an alphabet might come to exist in the mind of a primitive: inspired to communicate something, he reaches towards representation of real events, using actual dead animals to represent individual ideas or even sounds. The two individuals here even have a different idea about what reading and writing entails, and the more sophisticated, possibly many-eyed exile does not apprehend at first what the simpler being, which he believes is a pet, is doing — they use different means of communicating. However, it is never that simple in Wolfe and we have to ask ourselves, besides the obvious, which mythic sources he is using in this tale. In his introduction to *Storeys from the Old Hotel*, Wolfe indicates that he wrote "Alphabet" when he helped teach a science fiction and fantasy writing course at Portland State University in 1982 when students were given the assignment to write an SF story about a blocked writer.

While it explores the representational value of language and sometimes its failures to communicate (showing that an "A" represents a dead animal, the trapped being decides to "write" on his own forehead in a fatal form of self-expression, quite contrary to the result which the primitive writer intended). Even though the "he" of the text is able to project images into the mind of the "pet", it does not recognize that the pet has internalized his instructions and adapted a representative alphabet and is in turn trying to either illustrate its own system (or that it already understood the concepts of representation the alien writer was trying to convey). The story is not only in the metaphorical exploration of representation through a linguistic system composed of smaller units (letters evoke images in the minds of those who read them, and their own images might not exactly match that of the author) but in the nature of these two beings. It seems to be a science fiction story with the mythic strains of the Genesis tale running through it. The very first image is of the "pet" presenting a snake to the being who suffers from writers block in his isolation (in other words, the "he" of our story has fallen to a place where further creation no longer seems possible, for he has lost communion with his fellows.) Fruits, roots, serpents, an attempt to name things, lining up representations with concurrent sound — these artifacts all resonate with the biblical story of the serpent and the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, though in this case it seems that language itself is that fruit, as the ability to transmit thoughts from one individual to another and truly encapsulate good, evil, and all of creation in representation. The letters empower the "pet", and perhaps the gift of the exiled

visitor will actually blossom into the achievements of humanity to assert meaning and society on a hostile world.

The alien visitor has taken a bite of the fruit and then died, but its attempt to teach the pet will result in something quite miraculous: human civilization and thought as we know it. It seems that the exile lacks the Roman alphabet or individual letters/phonemes that the “pet” is trying to illustrate, and clearly, the “pet” is using an alphabet very similar to ours, which employs the sine curve of the snake as an “S”. The symbolist in Wolfe must adore the idea that letters themselves in certain languages were meant to be representative of an artifact found in reality, though the suicidal master seems incapable of grasping the idea. To some degree this is the story of “writing” to influence reality and the power of representation to actually affect the world. When the exile from Koneel, appositively described as “the circular marching of joy”, decides to “write” himself, he dies, but the communion of communication will follow in his wake, enabling the primitive pet and his fellow creatures to experience that joy in a different form. The “pet” has viewed the alien as a God and taken his lessons to a different place than intended.

The creature's association with an angel fallen from the sky like Lucifer has other biblical similarities: an examination of the Book of Ezekiel Chapter 1 shows many faced and many eyed creatures who appear like burning coals of fire or torches, surrounded by that fire with lightning flashes. This being also has many eyes, and while there is no description of his wings, he seems to be clearly different than the bipedal creature with its hairy face he comes to consider a pet. In Genesis, the Cherub who keeps out mankind from Eden is shown with a flaming sword, and the being in Wolfe's story seems to have the power to scare his pet away from the flaming silver pen (using the idea of the stampeding herds of bulls, whose metaphorical strength the pet comes to feel at the end of the story).

With these symbols in place, we might come to believe that this story is a kind of science fictional retelling of the biblical story of Adam (a strange ambiguous being brings knowledge and, perhaps with a fiery pen, ends the communion with the creature's “god” and thus the instruction that follows after eating a fruit — a story which we could imagine transforming into one of a serpent, the fruit that brings knowledge and death, and the fiery sword of the cherub that keeps man out of paradise — for after the being eats the offered fruit, it soon dies and deprives the man of communion with its god — the alphabet of the pet in its very nature seems to inherently describe death, as both the “S” and the “A” are images of dead animals, and the price of knowledge according to most Judeo-Christian theologians is actually eventual death). While Wolfe's story does not resonate on a literal level with Genesis, it does so on a large symbolic level: serpents, fruit, the coming of death, naming animals with a sound, self-knowledge, exile, a fall from grace — these are all included in both stories. Clearly our “pet” uses a similar alphabet to ours, and the conceivably many-eyed being does not comprehend that alphabet, associating the pet much more with primitive humanity.

Working against this idea is the absolute lack of any garden imagery and the very secular impression we are left with — the extraterrestrial nature of the visitor, who is superior but clearly no longer divine, if he ever even approximated divinity, seems more like something out of Moorcock's **Behold the Man** or, less cynically, Clarke's **2001** than a story which would come from Wolfe's pen (though Wolfe is definitely capable of a variety of themes and should not be pigeonholed as a fundamental Christian writer). The very theme of the story of Adam and Eve would here be distorted: primitive humanity worships an unworthy god who, in a fit of depression, kills himself after planting the seeds of a flawed civilization and giving the creature the ability to communicate with others of its kind. It also shows the creature how to leave a message for posterity after it is gone, though of course the creature believes that it will have left nothing behind after its

suicidal gesture.

THE ORIGIN OF S AND A

[image: Inline image 1] Clearly our “pet” is using identifiable cognates of the roman letters “S” and “A”? and certainly it could be possible that the “A” from he is using is the “aleph of early Phoenician or the alpha of Cumaean Greek, from which the Roman Alphabet is descended. The earliest letters and written ideas were probably in the form of hieroglyphics which marginally represented the objects they sought to represent, and “aleph, which eventually became our “A” actually did begin as a picture of an ox head, which would be consistent with the story. However, the Greek sigma, which was derived from the Pheonician shin, was probably derived from a bow rather than a snake, and was not usually rounded until Roman use, though there are a few Greek style alphabets which presents Sigma as a much closer to our modern S (such as that of the perviously mentioned ancient Cumaean, though it does not follow the sine-wave described in the story). However, the letter Nun, which came to represent “fish” and become the letter “N”, was originally used to connote a snake, and its earliest representations definitely resemble a serpent:

Many of these letters have their origin thousands of years before Christ. (If Wolfe knew of the story of the evolution of N from a snake to a fish representation, I am sure it is something which would greatly interest him as a religious symbolist, though of course the symbolic weight would be anachronistic).

POSSIBLE RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS:

To the hairy faced pet, the banished writer might actually resemble some of the images associated with biblical angels. It closes its eyes in a way that suggests it contains a multitude of them, and its pen appears to be something like an instrument of might with the power to enflame and destroy, making quite literal the old saying, “the pen is mightier than the sword” - though in this case perhaps the pet comes to remember the pen AS a flaming sword, the one which cast him out from being able to commune with his god.

More confusing is the “pink flaw” which separates the exiled being from his “brother-sisters”, and his plan to write on the cliff “his love for the myriad others — his thoughts of Koneel, the circular marching of joy.” He thinks, “I have been lifted up by the pink flaw — the hand of the god. And set down the god knows where. Never, never to see you again, you beautiful ones.” The name Koneel is mysterious, and given that this being does not share our alphabet, may not be attributed to any meaning on our Earth besides the one the text describes, as a circular march of joy which goes nowhere (as the angels are believed perhaps to adore and worship God, eternally). However, in the Finnish language, it does mean “mechanization”. (Whether relevant or not, Finnish myth involves the idea that the world is supported under the North Star by support column around which it turns, and that the movement around this creates a whirl through which souls can access the land of the dead through the northern sky, beyond the normal world).

Clearly, while the “pet” regards the exile as a god, the visitor sees something else as “the god” - whether this be the hand of fate or a conscious being is unclear. He speculates that the representation for “isolated” and “fool” in his linguistic system are the same, though reversed. (Also, on a possibly unrelated and irrelevant note, while the Fool tarot card reversed does not seem to directly invoke isolation, the card itself does imply new beginnings — something which would be apt if the basic story Wolfe is mutating is a distortion of the Genesis story, sans garden). The root being bitten by the pet “to show that it was good” also mirrors the language of Genesis, where God looked upon his work repeatedly “and saw that it was good”. As was already said, however, equating the visitor to both the Cherub, fallen Lucifer, and granting his

pen the eye-opening quality of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil is a massively secular distortion of the original story which almost changes its theme beyond recognition. Yet the echo of Genesis still pervades Wolfe's tale, somehow. It could be that Wolfe has decided to "mechanize" the story to make it one closer to the evolution of mankind and the inception of writing in general, and that instead of an androgynous, many-eyed, flame wielding angel of power, we have an androgynous, many-eyed, flame wielding alien of powerlessness.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Is the serpent meant to represent this many-eyed being from another place which fails to understand the nature of the creature it view as a pet? Is the story a metaphor for fallen Lucifer in the act of producing in man language and knowledge before destroying himself?

Often the idea of the Demiurge is as someone who "writes" creation — should we view this story as a secularization of divine ideas?

Is it SF? Persian or Greek Myth? Judeo-Christian? An allegory for the bringing of thought and the promethean fire of creativity and progress to primitive man? Maybe all of these, for it is clear that whatever change has been engendered in the "pet" who performs the bull dance for its god, it has been empowered and has actually learned how to communicate and represent the world around it, perhaps to achieve civilization (or true humanity). Its use of our alphabet and the presence of snakes and oxen tends to promote the idea that indeed we are looking at something which is a primitive human on Earth.

Should we assume that the "pink flaw" is a space anomaly rather than some more religious or biological concept? The exile attempts to record "sordid" details of the flaw on the cliff face.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Just as in "Lukora", there are simple, easy to explain events going on at the surface level that hint at the mythic and religious, but concretely pinning down the consequence of the story with absolute certainty is difficult. We are left with the feeling that it resembles myths rather than absolutely knowing that a particular allusion or event is being re-enacted. The attitude of the pet at the conclusion of the tale, that of feeling as strong as a bull, might have some symbolic affinity with bull-like figurehead present in the imagery of "To the Dark Tower Came". In addition, Wolfe's treatment of pagan gods and angels in other works such as *Urth of the New Sun *can also show them as remote and distant from God, and there is the sense in the Latro books that the pagan gods form a kind of strange psuedo-divine conglomeration where identities blur together and lose their distinctness over time, which might resemble the alien telepathic community from which our exile in this story has been forever isolated.