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RUNESMITH by Harlan Ellison and Theodore Sturgeon
(F&SF, May 1970, page 31)

Bruce Gillespie

This story attracts notice because it is "Dedicated to the Memory of Cordwainer Smith". However the reader will be hard put to find the influence of Cordwainer Smith in the story - or at least not the Cordwainer Smith I know.

Indeed, the story is almost a catalogue of un-Smithish procedures (if the editor will permit me such a word). There's the ubiquitous name, of course, but then there's plenty of other Smiths in the woodpile. The "hero" of this story is named Smith; he "crouches in the darkness on the 102nd floor" and he flees from an angry mob who are making their way up the stairs of an empty Empire State Building. Therefore the story is not set in Cordwainer Smith's universe of the Instrumentality, and makes me wonder just what Ellison and Sturgeon had in mind when they wrote the story.

There is an air of fear and absurdity which also does not remind me of Smith's stories. RUNESMITH is clogged with one line paragraphs like: "He had done it before, and destroyed the world." Zowie. So what? Place against that breathtaking statement the excruciating detail of the rest of the story's beginning:

" Terrible screams. Small creatures with things growing inside them, pushing their vital organs out of alignment, then out through the skin. Watery screams."

I may be wrong, but I don't think there's any writing in Smith's stories as literal and sadistic as that.

And the cliches! This is the point where RUNESMITH completely parts company with its dedication. Almost every line of the story contains words as vague as "things growing..." and "terrible screams...". In one paragraph picked at random, I read "terror and joy", "a-borning" and "something alive". Cordwainer Smith breathed new life into old words; these writers snuff the breath from those words they do use.

The "hero" Smith's mysterious power comes from the black arts, but the black arts were never part of Smith's vocabulary, except sometimes as side references. I doubt whether Smith would ever have written about a character so completely dependent on so trivial a support.

Worse still, these black arts form the mechanism of the story. In a vaguely-explained experiment, the "hero" has managed to destroy the whole world with these black arts. Even worse (if possible), Ellison and Sturgeon relate in detail the snappy conversation between a nixie and an incubus, who have bred Smith through "twelve generations" to destroy the world and let the Underworld take it over.

What other entertainments are provided? Oh yes, Smith has allowed himself to become the victim of these deathly boring devils because he has not slept during his whole life. Finally he succumbs to sleep and - whoopee! - defeats the horrible mob. You can almost hear Cordwainer Smith heaving in horror at the story's last paragraph:

" There was sun now. For the first time. Because he wanted sun. And he wanted cool breezes. And the scent of good things in the air... Perhaps it would be better now."
The story certainly could "be better now".

I may be wrong, but I suspect that this story represents a complete misunderstanding of Cordwainer Smith's work. For instance, the authors drag in a Latin "perfect square". The hero inscribes it on parchment and hides it in his shoe. There is a surface obscurity in the beginning of the story, instead of Cordwainer Smith's precise ambiguities. Although they would never admit it, RUNESMITH is an insult to Cordwainer Smith because it interprets his work as a trivial facade instead of the complexity it is.

On the other hand, RUNESMITH may be a cheap con trick, using Cordwainer Smith's name where no comparisons were intended. I hope neither writer would stoop so low.

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John Foyster

It is worth noting that Smith's best-known story, SCANNERS LIVE IN VAIN, had as protagonist one Martel (or Smith, if you like) who destroyed the known world to replace it with a new and less cruel one. But this first story was a work in which the author was turning out from himself towards the world, not a case of introversion, as is the case with RUNESMITH (if the the reference is not to Ballard's MAN ON THE 99TH FLOOR, then the authors have been careless).

There is one respect in which RUNESMITH is most unlike the stories of Cordwainer Smith, and that is in the language employed. Both Mr. Ellison and Mr. Sturgeon believe in using 'English as she is spoke' - a sort of snobbish notion of the jargon used by the masses. Thus, the sentences "He's gotta be up there" and "Now we got 'im" are typical of the authors of RUNESMITH, but most atypical of Cordwainer Smith, who remembered that he was writing a story which goes down onto paper and which is read. "gotta", for example, is a bac writer's funny hat: that is why Smith wouldn't use it. To write in pulp style means to get away with murder - perhaps even more so now when the emphasis in some fields is on language degradation rather than enrichment.

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Comments to Bruce Gillespie, PO Box 245, Ararat Victoria 3377, Australia. (except for you, OMPA). NR will stand in for JOE for a few months, for the next issue of the latter will not be published until 1971. 28/7/1970