

S F COMMENTARY

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**THE SILVERBERG FORUM
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March 1977

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INTRODUCTION

Bruce Gillespie

Bob Silverberg is not writing any more science fiction. He has signed off from the field.

This is the central fact which forms a background to the discussion in this issue of *S F Commentary*. Silverberg's move, and the way he has gone about it, are unprecedented in science fiction. Those people who are still involved in the writing or publishing of s f, or in discussing the field, have felt called upon to show some reaction to Silverberg's "resignation".

However, this fact is not the reason for "The Silverberg Forum". The main reason is that Bob Silverberg has had quite a few books published during recent years, and that reviews of these books have gathered together on my desk. The shape of the Forum became clear when George Turner contributed his long article.

The Silverberg Forum is not arranged in any way that expresses a combined opinion of the man or his works. This is a kaleidoscope, not a spotlight. George Turner and Terry Green react quite differently to Silverberg's message of disillusionment. Several of the reviews have been contributed by people like Paul Anderson and Van Ikin, who admire Silverberg's works in general. Other reviews have been contributed by people like me or Stanislaw Lem, who do not, in general, like Silverberg's fiction. And then there will be the long section which is designed to show that Silverberg is the best anthologist working in the field today.

We come not to praise Silverberg, nor to bury him. The impulse behind George's article appears to be that we might better praise his potential than his current achievements. But several contributors have praise for his current achievements. The Forum has only one purpose: that you be stimulated to form your own opinions about Silverberg's work. But because Silverberg the author has made plain his own attitudes to the entire field of science fiction, this process will involve a reevaluation of your attitudes to science fiction as well.

There is one article which I could not include — but it is almost mandatory reading to appreciate most of the contents. That is the article to which George Turner and Terry Green refer: "Sounding Brass, Tinkling Cymbal". It can be found in *Hell's Cartographers* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson; Harper and Row), edited by Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison. It appeared first in *Foundation* 7/8, edited by Peter Nicholls, in England. The now-famous "Epilogue" appeared with the American appearance of the article, in *Algol 25*, edited by Andy Porter, available at Space Age Books.

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George Turner

Robert Silverberg

THE PHENOMENON

George Turner discusses
"Sounding Brass, Tinkling Cymbal"

Chapter 1 of
**Hell's Cartographers:
Some Personal Histories
of Science Fiction Writers**
edited by Brian W. Aldiss
and Harry Harrison

Weidenfeld & Nicholson :: 1975
246 pages :: 3 Pound 50/A10.30

Harper & Row :: 1976
246 pages :: \$7.95

The Masks of Time
by Robert Silverberg

Ballantine U6121 :: 1968
252 pages :: 75c

A Time of Changes
by Robert Silverberg

Signet Q4729 :: 1971
220 pages :: 95c

Dying Inside
by Robert Silverberg

Born With the Dead
by Robert Silverberg

Gallancz :: 1974
267 pages :: 2 Pound 75

**We know that the tail must wag the
dog, for the horse is drawn by the
cart:
But the Devil whoops, as he whooped
of old: "It's clever, but is it
Art?"**

(Kipling, "The Conundrum of
the Workshop")

Robert Silverberg comes first for consideration in *Hell's Cartographers* (reviewed elsewhere) because his essay (each is about 15,000 words long) is presented first. He is the only one of the six whom I have met personally, but that meeting has had no influence on this essay, which was planned in detail long before I encountered him at Aussiecon. Aside from the information in this article, all I can tell you of him is that (a) he reads extremely well from his own work; (b) he likes to hunt up restaurants serving exotic foods; and (c) on his first day in Melbourne he negotiated the dreaded five-way Camberwell Junction by car without damaging the car, himself, his wife, or the intrepid traffic cop who presides over the disaster area.

His essay is headed, "Sounding Brass, Tinkling Cymbal", which may be interpreted as a rueful description of his early career, and the heading is followed by a group of epigraphic quotations, including this:

**And though I have the gift of prophecy, and
understand all mysteries, and all knowledge;
and though I have all faith, so that I could
remove mountains, and have not charity,
I am nothing.**

Charity? Of all things, why that in this connection?

Charity: from the Latin *caritas*, one of the nearly untranslatable words whose inflexions have, through the centuries, been split into many words of ever finer shades of meaning. In late Latin it meant the Christian love of fellow men, but in earlier days was involved with less simple matters, such as the *need* to care for others, the *propriety* of caring, the *virtue* of involvement through caring (the

Romans were great hands at exact definitions of propriety and virtue) and even the *ability* to care.

That last one . . . empathy or the lack of it. Is that the meaning we are to take? I don't know. Too often in this essay Silverberg is elusive at crucial points, but even the nature of a man's defences tell something.

The essay begins with three pages of muddle — interesting stuff but still muddle: the cautious prodding of a writer having to face himself as a subject for the first time — but the unwitting portrait of a man at a loss is not unattractive in its impression of a search for an honest attitude. At last he takes the plunge and begins at everyone's prosaic beginning: "I am an only child born halfway through the Great Depression." A long quotation must follow here because it is germinal to all the life that follows:

**I have no very fond recollections of my
childhood. I was puny, sickly, plagued
with allergies and freckles and (I thought)
quite ugly. I was too clever by at least
half, which made for troubles with my
playmates. My parents were remote figures
. . . It was a painful time, lonely and em-
bitting; I did make friends but, growing
up in isolation and learning none of the
social graces, I usually managed to alienate
them quickly . . . On the other hand there
were compensations: intelligence is prized
in Jewish households . . . I was taken to
museums, given all the books I wanted,
and allowed money for my hobbies. I took
refuge from loneliness in these things; I
collected stamps and coins, harpooned
hapless butterflies and grasshoppers . . .
hammered out crude stories on an ancient
typewriter, all with my father's strong
encouragement and frequent enthusiastic
participation, and it mattered less and less
that I was a troubled misfit in the class-
room . . .**

(He didn't know it, still doesn't know it, but he spent his youth in heaven. I was also a Depression child.)

All the adult preoccupations are in embryo here, notably the acute consciousness of unusual intelligence (and let no one sneer at that — it's a brutal knowledge for a child to bear), the sense of alienation, the proliferation of interests and of course, the attitudes which channelled into science fiction.

Comes now the obligatory nostalgic essayette within the essay which represents all our yesterdays in science fiction, the first acquaintance through Verne and Wells and *The Connecticut Yankee*, some "gaudy memories" of Buck Rogers and *Planet Comics*, of *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories*, of Taine and Lovecraft and Stapledon. It is easy to share this simple ecstasy of time past until, right at the end of the luxurious wallow we come to: . . . and above all Stapledon's *Odd John*, which spoke personally to me as I suppose it must to any child who is too bright for his own good . . . But some flaws in my intelligence were making themselves apparent, to me and to my teachers if not to my parents: I had a superb memory and a quick wit, but I lacked depth, consistency and originality . . . some of my classmates were better than I at grasping fundamental principles and drawing new conclusions from them.

In this passage are clues to what was to become a cruel floundering among literary problems.

One further quotation before the story of the writing phenomenon gets under way: And I spoke openly of a career in writing . . . Why science fiction? Because it was science fiction that I preferred to read, though I had been through Shakespeare and Cervantes and that crowd too.

" . . . And that crowd too." The dismissal is repellent. Preferring to read s f in youth is understandable and not at all reprehensible, for one is not really ready for "that crowd" until later, but the hint of irritation written in middle age is unacceptable in its feeling that the young Silverberg was impatient with literary "art" and, having "been through" it, got it out of his system.

It might seem that I make too much of a chance phrase if the sequel did not show unmistakably that this is just what he did and that today the consequences are coming home to roost.

II

Silverberg began to write s f at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Let him tell it:

Off went stories, double-spaced and bearing accurate word counts (612, 1814, 2705). They were dreadful, naturally, and they came back . . . Why science fiction? . . . because I had stumbled into the world of science fiction fandom . . . and I knew that my name on the contents page of *Astounding* or *Startling* would win me much prestige . . .

Every commercial writer wants prestige, deny it how he may, affect to despise the public as he will; many a writer wants it more than he wants money (though money is rarely despised save by over-literate asses who usually turn out to be too damned arty for their own good). Silverberg made the money but still he covets prestige of a particular kind which has evaded him. It is a pity that he started creating his difficulties so early.

Again, let him tell it:
I read textbooks on the narrative art and learned a good deal, and began also to read the stories in the science fiction magazines with a close analytical eye, measuring the ratio of dialogue to exposition, the length of paragraphs and other technical matters . . .

One absorbs this with a peculiar horror which perhaps only another writer can experience. One doesn't expect a fifteen-year-old to understand the requirements of self-expression, but this considered embarkation on

a study, not of techniques, but of mechanical procedures is heartbreaking. If someone had told him then that these were matters to be imitated only on the lowest rung of pulp creativity, that the *writer* creates his own technical method, his break into print might have been delayed a few years — and two decades of apprenticeship might have been compressed into a tenth of the time. There came a time when Lester del Rey and others tried to tell him something of the sort, but it was too late; he had become a success, and since when does a boy of eighteen or nineteen turn his back on success?

In 1953, having sold few short stories, he essayed a novel which was accepted on condition that some changes were made. He was lucky enough to strike an editor willing to go into great detail as to the book's faults but, even after revision, received a reader's report which amounted to a statement that he knew nothing about writing. Undismayed — this young determination is astonishing — he rewrote again and *Revolt on Alpha C* was published. Apparently it still sells after twenty years, but I must confess to never having previously heard of it.

The next ten pages or so detail a success story equalled, in financial terms, possibly only by Heinlein and Asimov. Here are significant extracts:

But several quite ambitious stories, which I thought worthy of the leading magazines of the time, failed to sell at all, from which I began to draw a sinister conclusion: that if I intended to earn a livelihood writing fiction, it would be wiser to use my rapidly developing technical skills to turn out mass-produced formulaized stories at high speed, rather than to lavish passion and energy on more individual works that would be difficult to sell.

**

I sold five stories in August 1955, three in September, three in October, six in November, nine in December . . . Suddenly, in my final year of college, I was actually earning a living, and quite a good living, by writing.

**

I developed a deadly facility; if an editor needed a 7500 word story of alien conquest in three days to balance an issue about to go to press, he need only phone me and I would produce it. Occasionally I took my time and tried to write the sort of science fiction I respected as a reader, but usually I had trouble selling such stories to the better markets, which reinforced by growing cynicisms.

(Obviously it does not seem to have produced a suspicion that he was as yet a lousy writer.)

**

. . . This hectic activity was crowned at the World Science Fiction Convention in 1956, when I was voted a special Hugo as the most promising new writer of the year . . . It was interesting to note that the writers I defeated for the trophy were Harlan Ellison . . . and Frank Herbert, whose impressive *Under Pressure* had appeared in *Astounding* . . .

Interesting, hard to credit (the voters), and potentially disastrous.

**

My craftsmanship was improving steadily, in the narrow sense of craft as knowing how to construct a story and make it move; possibly some fatal defect of the soul, some missing quality, marred my serious work . . . I will leave art to the artists, I said quietly, and earn a decent living at what I do best.

I throw that quote in for what it is worth; he doesn't seem ever to have really believed it.

**

By the end of 1956 I had more than a million published words behind me. I lived in

a large, handsome apartment . . . learning about fine wines and exotic foods and planning a trip to Europe . . . I wrote, I sold, I prospered . . . I wanted to win economic security . . . to London and Paris, to Arizona and to California, treating myself at last to the travels I had not had in boyhood . . . made some cautious and quite successful forays into the stock market . . .

If all this sounds unrelievedly commercial, there were repentant moments:

Not everything I wrote was touched by corruption . . . I felt guilty that the stuff I was churning out was the sort of thing I had openly scorned in my fan-magazine critical essays seven or eight years before.

(How, knowing better, he continued the churning out, is beyond me. I not only say I'd rather starve but, on two occasions, damned nearly did for just that reason. It's a question of temperament on which one can't make a judgment.)

Scattered through my vast output of the late 1950s, then, are a good many quite respectable stories . . . decently done jobs. Came collapse and apocalypse:

Then, late in 1958, the science fiction world collapsed. Most of the magazines . . . went out of business . . . and those that survived became far more discriminating about what they would publish. My kind of mass production became obsolete.

Not a word here about the plain fact that, when the chips are down, only quality counts. How he must have despised his readers, conscious as he always was of that intellectual capacity. Did he also despise himself? To do him justice, I think that, in some corner of his mind, he did; it shows in odd turns of phrase, unnecessary sentences, never stated but disturbingly there.

From 1958 to 1962, he wrote only occasional science fiction. For the rest, he wrote anything for anybody, and moved into the non-fiction field, which was a fruitful move:

. . . strange pseudonymous stories and articles: "Cures for Sleepless Nights", "Horror Rides the Freeway", "I Was a Tangier Smuggler" . . . Annual output climbed well above a million words in 1959 and went even higher in 1960 and 1961.

As ever, he made money. In the late 1950s he was wintering in the West Indies, summering in Canada . . . Italy . . .

An attempt to capitalise on these travels with a little children's book on Pompeii failed in itself but led to the series of books of popularised science which added another layer of gold to his growing fortune: *Lost Cities and Vanished Civilisations*, *Empires in the Dust*, and so on. With a now automatic skill, these were collated from other men's works (no disgrace in this; such compendia are necessary and invaluable if knowledge is not to be locked up in unreadable research theses) but soon he began to consult sources, visit sites, conduct individual research . . .

So he survived the slump by riding over it. And yet:

There seemed no commercial reason to get back into s f . . . I had more work than I could handle in the lucrative juvenile non-fiction hardcover field. Only the old shame remained to tweak me . . . I wanted to atone . . . Frederik Pohl became editor of *Galaxy* (and) suggested that I do short stories for him and offered me absolute creative freedom . . . I found myself drawn back into science fiction . . . as a serious, dedicated artist . . .

This was 1962, but it was 1967 before he published work he could refer to as "my first really major science fiction". In the meantime: Early in 1962 I had purchased an imposing house — a mansion, in fact — in a lovely, almost rural enclave near the northwest corner of New York City . . . own lawn and

garden . . . giant oak trees . . . separate four room suite became my working area . . . books and paintings and *objets d'art* . . . beautiful and stately . . .

Who could not forgive the note of triumph? The lonely, sometimes unhappy, consciously alienated child of Brooklyn had become not only a financial success but "a civilised and fastidious man". He was not yet thirty years old. It was a triumph.

It had been paid for in ways not yet entirely clear to him, but it was a triumph.

III

In 1966

I withdrew, bit by bit, from my lunatic work schedule: having written better than a million and a half words for publication in 1965, I barely exceeded a million in 1966, and have never been anywhere near that insane level of productivity since.

Then 1967

was the year in which my first really major science fiction, *Thorns* and *The Time Hoppers* and a novella called "Hawksbill Station", would finally be published. Would they be taken as signs of reform and atonement for past literary sins, or would they be ignored as the work of a writer who by his own admission had never been much worth reading?

As I recall, the change of literary attack was both noticed and appreciated, but surely none of these books could be called major s f! They were, in fact, the same old Silverberg with the melodrama toned down and the whole better written in terms of smoothness and structure. Characterisation was and would remain a stumbling block.

But change had been initiated and, hopefully, would be followed by improvement not in technical areas (in which he could properly claim every useful competence but not always a balanced judgment of which to employ) but in the matter of producing work "that grew from my own creative needs instead of the market's demands."

Many an earnest *writer* has started with this ambition, only to discover that more, *much* more than creative thought is required and that technique supplies fewer answers than might be imagined. Silverberg's material success had been achieved by methods which were to plague him abominably (how do you divest yourself of such a thing as facility?) and he realised it; whether or not he realised *all* that was entailed is less certain. The indications are that he did not.

At this time of change and new beginning occurred an incident which appears to have been traumatic but, in keeping with the bouts of reticence which are so at odds with the moments of self-revelation, leaves the reader puzzled as to the core of Silverberg's reaction and the deeper reasons for its results.

. . . When I awakened at half past three one frigid morning to the glare of an unaccustomed light in the house . . . So out into the miserable night we went and watched the house burn . . . By dawn it was over. The roof was gone; the attic had been gutted; my third-floor office was a wreck; and the lower floors of the house, though unburned, were awash in water rapidly turning into ice.

Thus the facts, presented with the terse, selective detail of the novelist. Then, the facts beyond the facts:

. . . But I had felt the hand of some supernatural being pressing against me that night, punishing me for real and imagined sins, levelling me for overweening pride as though I had tried to be Agamemnon. (Why Agamemnon? Agamemnon's significant weakness was moral cowardice; he was proud but was not insensately punished for his pride: No use guessing.)

The next paragraph is a miracle of the

compression which his work so often lacks:

Friends rallied round. Barbara performed prodigies, arranging to have our belongings taken to storage (surprisingly, most of our books and virtually all the works of art had survived, though the structure itself was a ruin) and negotiating with contractors. I was not much good for anything for days — stupefied, God-haunted, broken. We moved to a small, inadequate rented house about a mile away as the immense job of reconstruction began. I bought a new typewriter, reassembled some reference books, and, after a few dreadful weeks, began once more to work in strange surroundings. In nine months the house was ready to be occupied again.

The experience was over. The outcome was to follow fast.

But I was never the same again. Until the night of the fire I had never, except perhaps at the onset of my illness in 1966, been touched by the real anguish of life. I had not known divorce or the death of loved ones or poverty or unemployment, I had never experienced the challenges and terrors of parenthood, had never been mugged or assaulted or molested, had not been in military service (let alone actual warfare), had never been seriously ill.

The suspicion of this emotional innocence is aroused early in the essay. Save for a short-term warehouse job in the late teens there is nowhere a hint of contact with any but the literary world, that special world removed from reality by the very techniques and considerations which seek to explain and exploit it. Even travel offers no more than grist to the literary mill, for travel is not in any sense a *life* experience. It broadens the mind, so they say; more accurately, it is a spectator sport. Travel teaches only when you are *involved* actively in the life of the place you visit; merely looking is pleasure, not experience.

But now I had literally passed through the flames. The fire and certain more personal upheavals some months earlier had marked an end to my apparent immunity to life's pain, and drained from me, evidently for ever, much of the bizarre energy that had allowed me to write a dozen or more books of high quality (sic) in a single year.

It is not enough. Nothing is really told. The burning of the house, with its treasures an obvious placement as the centrepiece of a career, is easy enough to see as a symbolic warning from the watching Eumenides, or as the breaking of a lifeline whose only direction had been upward, or as a caution against pride (a matter mentioned earlier by Silverberg but not followed up) or as almost anything you like to make it in the name of the in-group psychologist for this year. It is less easy to arouse the sympathy that *caritas* should provide; one has sympathy but not empathy. The suppression of detail defeats itself; one feels, however unworthily, that, despite the mention of family problems in preceding months, the reaction was too great, too unhibited, too much the uncontrolled reaction of a man hurt for the first occasion in half a lifetime. One — almost anyone — looks back on the upheavals of forty years, the savage knockings down and the bitter climbings back, the chains of griefs and failures and disappointments and the unremarkable, commonplace courage of dealing with them with scarcely a break in step. Reading Silverberg's account — credit his honesty of purpose that he is fully aware of his psychological unpreparedness for a major setback — one finds oneself muttering, churlishly and uncharitably, "You needed that, mate, not for your art but to firm your grip on realities."

To end the account of the aftermath: Until 1967, I had cockily written everything in one draft . . . making only minor corrections by hand afterwards . . . When I

resumed work after the fire . . . I wasted thousands of sheets of paper over the next three years before I came to see, at last, that I had become as other mortals and would have to do two or three or even ten drafts of every page before I could hope to type final copy.

It is peculiar. Some time of disorder and reassessment was to be expected, followed by a rocking back to normal. One reasonable explanation is that the need to be a phenomenon had lost its point; a single stroke had hacked away hack ambition and with it the facile attitudes which bore facile work. When Othello's occupation's gone, the artist must take over from the mercenary who has tired of the battle. It's a cliché explanation, but Silverberg offers none at all, so it must do for a working peg. Only one thing matters: "two or three or even ten drafts . . ." And why not? This is food for congratulation. It was Ben Jonson who cried out in an artist's anguish because revealed genius might have been greater genius, "Would he had blotted a thousand!"

IV

The remaining pages of his essay contain Silverberg's account of his ambition to become an artist in prose:

The fire had . . . pushed me, I realised, into a deeper, more profound expression of feelings. It had been a monstrous tempering of my artistic skills.

There is a temptation to ask here: what does he think art is? A profound expression of feeling delivered with artistic skill?

That is an aspect of artistry rather than art, and a pretty commonplace one. More is demanded. Regrettably, we will nowhere in this essay find a Silverberg definition of literary art; sympathy becomes vitiated by a feeling that he has none. There is, of course, no *accepted* definition and, in the nature of aesthetics, it is scarcely possible that there should be, but the aspiring artist needs a personal definition, otherwise to what does he aspire? The simple, all too often offered, "I just want to write as well as I possibly can" is meaningless until some meaning is given to "as well as".

And, though art is the better for a sound basis of technical skill, and worth little without it, that remains a basis only. Technical skills are two cents a bunch in modern s f but they have given us no great writers and a bare handful of good ones.

Silverberg comments on his work since 1968, and here the reader may be in for shocks and puzzlements. Few writers can assess their own work accurately; they judge what they *intended* it to be, while the reader judges what is actually given him. Most writers have had the experience of attempting one thing and achieving another, and the classic instance could be Uptain Sinclair's despairing cry over his *The Jungle*: "I aimed for their hearts and kicked them in the stomach."

Since Silverberg describes himself, in these later years, as a "dedicated artist" in intention, we must look at some of the works of these years.

"*The Masks of Time* failed by only a few votes to win a Nebula . . ." This would have been 1968, when the award went to Panshin's *Rite of Passage*. The kindest comment might be that there is little to choose between them and that it should have been a "No Award" year. (I'm much in favour of "No Award" when nothing outstanding is on offer — two years in three, perhaps.) *The Masks of Time* was a vast improvement on previous Silverberg novels in sophistication but was abominably and boringly over-wordy, as well as facile and undisciplined; much of its point became hazy in deliberately oblique presentation. I wrote at the time that it suffered from beginner's errors (which, understandably, annoyed Silverberg) and see no reason to alter the judgment. He was aiming at a different type of

novel but had not realised that a new beginning demands a new beginner. He had learned much but, as yet, had unlearned nothing.

He did win a Nebula Award in 1971 with the dreadful *A Time of Changes*, which says little for the connoisseurship of the SFWA. I quote from my review in the Melbourne Age:

... A culture wherein the idea of self is immoral and the word "I" obscene. Inevitably one man (tall, handsome, muscular, hair and intelligent — yes, that one) discovers the liberating qualities of the concept "I" and sets out to literate his planet. Shades of Ayne Rand's *Anthem* and Zam- yatin's *We!* And not to be compared with either.

Bluntly, the book was utterly unoriginal in conception, undercut the philosophic content by operating in terms of physical action, and rocked belief by offering a comic-strip hero.

A Time of Changes was the only real literary disaster of the later period, unless we include the revision of *Recalled to Life*. A wiser man would have told the publishers to forget that project. (I repeat, he is a rare writer who can evaluate his own work.)

"My short story, 'Passengers', won a Nebula early in 1970." Like others who write in *Hell's Cartographers*, Silverberg seems to feel that these awards cast a halo of quality. They do not and, being the outcome of popularity votes, are often incomprehensible to the reader with critical standards. "Passengers", for instance, is a neat little horror filler for a magazine, in which time travellers from the future take over the minds of hosts who remain conscious in an impotent fashion of what is being done with their bodies. The setup is described interestingly; then, at the critical point, the hero is parted from his girl as his body is taken over by a homosexual passenger. Silverberg's skills are not always reinforced by a proper dramatic appreciation; here he achieves the unpleasantness of the situation without the black-comic irony which might have rendered it memorably horrible. One is left with the feeling that the idea had run out of steam and its creator had nothing to say. Some implied comment is needed, some larger ambience. None being offered, it remains a curious statement in a vacuum.

Another short story, "Good News from the Vatican", also took a Nebula. Why? It was an overplayed piece of cynicism (the election of a robot Pope), which Silverberg himself calls "a kind of parody of science fiction", and the description is apt. Again, it was an idea — or a fantasy day-dream rather than an idea, because the story presented nothing to justify the concept — which ran down and stopped when the description of it was complete. The idea was there, but it had nowhere to go, and we will find this true of much of Silverberg's work. He is encouraged by readers who laud this scrappiness with awards and eulogies, but such encouragement can only lure him to further dead ends.

One last extended quotation gives us something of his own thinking on the matter:

Though nominated every year, my books and stories have finished well behind more conservative, "safer" works . . . Not that it affects what I write: I am bound on my own course and will stay to it. I wish only that I could be my own man and still give pleasure to the mass of science fiction readers.

It looks good until the writer in you (as distinct from the critic, who is a cold-blooded bastard) cries out that, if you want to be your own man in art, you can't afford a damn about any feelings but your own. "Mass of science fiction readers", indeed!

For the craftsman the reader exists; he is the selling point. For the artist, himself exists; if nobody wants what he offers, all he has is the ecstasy of creation. Which is enough. He

will take a job — any job — to feed wife and family. Art is a private thing. When outside appreciation makes the result of art a public thing, that is the bonus of the world's gratitude. To want that, even to need it, is natural, but to see it as part of the endeavour may well cripple the work.

Silverberg has the material rewards; now he wants the prestige, that same thing he wanted when he started to write. But the question arises: Is "his own man" the kind of man who commands mass prestige? Can he, in fact, have it both ways?

He must make a decision; I think he has not made it yet. (Whether or not the prestige accorded by massed s f readers is intrinsically worth having is a question we can pass by. Only a frigid cynicism could deal adequately with it.)

A propos having borrowed a "science fiction theme for use in an otherwise 'straight' mainstream novel (*Dying Inside*)," he says, "I no longer had to apologise, certainly not, for shortcomings of literary quality."

Ummm. If, by literary quality, he means vocabulary and sentence structure, allusion and cross-reference and so on, he may be near enough to right — though he is not, in fact, the totally accomplished prose writer, having much to learn about punctuation, for instance, and redundancy. But literary quality, in the broader sense of total effect, which is finally what matters, involves requirements lacking in that depressing novel, above all the dramatic appreciation of which he seems distressingly short. Shorn of melodrama, he fumbles. *Dying Inside* simply ran downhill, reached bottom, and rolled to a stop.

The hero, a lonely telepath in a non-telepathic world, loses his talent as he ages; what had been a problem as a talent becomes equally a problem as a deprivation. (This ironic aspect and all its implications did not seem to occur to the writer.) It was a dicey, downbeat theme on which to risk a novel (this sort of thing needs compactness if it is to deliver a punch) and killed at the outset by the dreariness of the hero. The book drips self pity and the basic idea remains undeveloped because the writer has not grasped the dramatic possibilities which alone could develop it. The commonplace man with an uncommonplace talent never radiates human warmth because no insight is offered. He is less a man than a template.

I noted earlier the sense of Silverberg's detachment from any but the literary life. So with his characters — they dwell in books, and none has ever breathed air. (If only he had spent a few years working among *people!*) His most dramatic coups are still literary coups — the climax of "Thomas the Proclaimer", for instance, is simply a series of literary-religious references hung on a man who should be interesting in his own right, and is not.

Silverberg often transmits the feeling that passages of introspection must add depth to character. In fact, introspection is an explanatory device, and explanation for its own sake is a trap. In characterisation, the old adage holds good: Plot is character in action. In movement. In change. In confirmation. In confrontation. In *action*. A man is what he does, not what he thinks about himself.

He observes characteristics accurately enough, but seems to see only what three centuries of novelists have recorded already and to divine nothing fresh from the permutations and combinations. Insight is lacking. The "mainstream" writer knows what the genre writer either never learns or finds too difficult to cope with — that the characters determine the novel, not the other way about, and that, without adequate characterisation influencing the action, there is only romance, where inadequacies must be covered by manipulation of plot.

This seems to be Silverberg's most serious

technical failing, the weakness which has slowed too many novels to a sticky flow of words.

There is another weakness, not so much technical as intellectual, which he himself described in the young Brooklyn boy:

... I lacked depth, consistency and originality . . . some of my classmates were better than I at grasping fundamentals and drawing new conclusions from them.

This may best be illustrated by a review of his recent collection of novellas, *Born With the Dead*.

V

Each of these tales is interesting in concept and fully the product of an assured technique. And each is, in retrospect, unsatisfying; always one is left with a feeling of having ransacked a cupboard of good things without finding the one thing that was promised.

In the title story, a method of revivifying the dead has been discovered and Sybilla, who died, lives again. But the once-dead do not rejoin the living; they dwell apart, uninterested in the normally living, even those they once loved, interested only in each other in ways incomprehensible.

Jorge, who was Sybilla's husband, cannot believe that she can refuse his undying love and follows her about the world, deluding himself that with propinquity all will be as it once was. (The pursuit is carried out mainly in Africa, giving Silverberg opportunity to load the narrative with local colour, hunting scenes, and history/legend. Enthralling stuff.) The pursuit is, of course, hopeless. He even follows here, futilely disguised as a resurrectee, to the private town of the risen dead.

But Orpheus cannot reclaim Eurydice who does not want to leave Hell. Eventually he joins her in the obvious fashion, via death and resurrection, to find that his old desire no longer exists; it is nine more years before they so much as bother to meet.

In a short story, this would make a nice irony, possibly sufficient in itself, but in a 30,000 word novella we are offered too much else, all of which must find a place in the final pattern.

There is the matter of Jorge's sexual obsession. Literature has made us familiar with the idea from Daniel Quilp and Soames Forsyte to the latest poppings of porn, but few people (psychologists and such specialists excepted) have experienced or encountered it. So, in any variation, we are entitled to expect some insight, or at least some striking angle of presentation. We get neither. Jorge has an obsession; what manner of man he might otherwise be we never discover. He remains an obsession without a man behind it, and the climax tells us nothing more.

This is also a story about death, but it has nothing to say about death. It is merely mysterious. There is a change in the resurrected. One asks at once, What change, and Why? There are no answers. This and Jorge's obsession are the total ambience of the story, on which all hangs, and we learn nothing of either. The resurrected remain incomprehensible, Jorge joins them, and no shred of meaning remains. No comment is given, direct or oblique. We are led, with some artistry be it admitted, to the point where denouement should tie the threads in a moment of revelation or catharsis, but have only come a long way to arrive nowhere.

One doesn't want to know the precise name of the destination, each i dotted and t crossed as on some literary railway station; hint or clue would be enough. Promises should be honoured in some fashion, but here is not even a blank signboard. Modern s f, particularly of the "new wave" (phrase covering a multitude of confidence tricks), has fallen too far into the habit of outlining a story painstakingly and lavelling it "story" (see Damon Knight's *Orbit* 13).

"Thomas the Proclaimer" promises much more hugely — apocalypse, no less, in about 24,000 words. And why not, if you bring it off? Thomas is a criminal who has undergone spiritual revelation. A cross of the Forgiven Thief outside Damascus? Among other things. In a world ready for revivalism he preaches the power of faith and channels the belief of the faithful into a repetition of the Joshuan miracle — the sun stands still for 24 hours. (And don't forget that "Joshua" is another form of "Jesus".)

But a world panting for faith isn't able to cope with the results. Commonsense is baffled, Science is determined on rational explanation, and the Church, with a foot in each of the camps of faith and materialism, doesn't much care for the performances of amateur spanner-throwers. So, in confusion, the collapse of society begins. It's a lovely theme for satire, particularly as Thomas has a campaign manager, Saul Kraft (now there's a name to wrestle with) who wants results.

Disastrously, Silverberg plays it straight and tumbles headfirst into the trap that the satirist would have leapt over nimbly. He is left with his own question, God or Science? and has no answer. He has to fall back on plain story, of Thomas betrayed by his manager to the mob who have now been conditioned to want his blood. (To muddle the identifications completely, Thomas dies in the conviction that Kraft is his Judas!) So the story of the world in crisis crumbles into a non-conclusion wherein the argument is terminated by diverting the reader's attention from the point of it. What about the staggering, directionless world crying out for an answer? Nothing about it.

The story is tricked out as a demonstration of techniques, with the Hysteria Piece and the Thomas In First Person Chapter, the Housewife In First Person Chapter and the Intellectual Speech Chapter and so on, leaping from style to style with a breathless taking of bows. And all adding up to a fragmented picture which is never resolved. Again we travel in hope, only to discover that the writer hasn't really thought it all out and doesn't know his destination. With a flip of that technical facility on which he places so much store, he gives it a bang-up finale which seems profound but, on examination, turns out to be labelled Escape Route.

In "Going", he does it again, in other fashion. In the twenty-first century, life is medico-surgically prolonged; people live more or less as long as they wish. (Population is controlled on a one in one out basis.) When psychological forces predispose them for death they Go at a time of their own choosing. It is the convention that one should have a sane reason for Going, something better than just getting away from it all or sugar-baby don't love me no more. Death is to be accepted with a sane philosophy of life and death, not marking it with a gesture but rounding it with completion. The story is of a great musician, Henry Staunt who, at age 136, decides to Go.

It is a demanding conception and Silverberg does not rise to it. He hamstring himself early in the piece with such institutions as the Office of Fulfillment and the Houses of Leavetaking with their concerned, smotheringly understanding Guides. It is the world of Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*, drawn without a smile; with painstaking dignity it is pure Hollywood with portentous chords never far from the soundtrack.

The matter of "reason for Going" defeats Silverberg. Staunt keeps on deferring his Going, which looks to him less and less inviting as he becomes a sort of senior citizen in the House for Leavetaking (now there's a comedy situation for you), and eventually Goes because he has dithered for so long that he can't, in decency, do anything else. Silverberg tries to give

him a dignified exit, but it is too late; we know the old fraud and would cherrfully sit on his chest to pur the hemlock down his throat.

It needs the satirical touch but, since it is done in exactly the same basic style as the dramatic pieces, I can only assume that it is offered for serious consideration. As such, it collapses at the same point as the other two. Right at the end it becomes plain that the writer has had a first class idea (and many of his story ideas are bloody marvellous) and has not thought it through. Each story is a montage of finely executed pieces lacking an overall design.

"Some of my classmates were better than I a grasping fundamental and drawing new conclusions from them."

It seems to be still true.

But I don't believe it has to remain true. Here I make an act of faith, because I have no firm evidence for what I write next.

I believe that Silverberg is still a prisoner of facility and technique, knowing internally that each page is good (which, as a page, it usually is) and feeling, when he has found a point at which to finish, that the result is a story or a novel. So it is, of a kind, but I believe that his failure to satisfy readers with the books he himself values (*Son of Man*, for example) is rooted in an inability to see the work whole. I believe that he observes the rounded, self-containedly excellent sections, but has no overall view of their fitting together. A novel, at the last, is a single work in which the parts not only matter, but *fit*. I believe, too, that he has not realised his failure to face the problems and questions raised by his concepts.

The Book of Skulls, *Dying Inside*, *The World Inside*, *Born with the Dead*, *A Time of Changes* — each one runs down to its climax because the climax resolves the story without resolving the theme. The reader is left with a complex of ideas, each exciting in itself but without a given relevance.

I believe one more thing: Silverberg is only in young middle age, and in his writing the best is yet to be. If, that is, he is prepared to forsake dependence on technique (a good servant but a slippery master) and accept the fact that, for the novel of ideas to succeed, the ideas must first be threshed out thoroughly in the mind of the author.

He has the youth and the financial security to start again from first principles. I wish he would. He would have every chance of becoming the writer which, in his heart, he wants to be.

VI

"Sounding Brass, Tinkling Cymbal", he headed his essay, a little unfairly to himself. He is better than that.

But the concern with *caritas*?

It is a doubt, born of what he regards as an alienated childhood, of his ability to merge totally with the human stream? So much of his fiction turns upon alienation and compromise, and so much of it closes just before the point at which understanding is reached. Not lack of charity seems the problem, but a failure to pursue to the end.

There comes a time to stop and think, digest, evaluate. Further experience will merely swell the unintegrated mass. The mind must suppress its accumulated conclusions and make reassessment.

So also with the technician seeking to free himself as artist: he must discard what he thinks he knows and begin again with those elementary difficulties which technique seems to have solved but has only glossed over.

The boy who escaped from Brooklyn to earn awards and rewards in fabulous fields of space and time is still the prisoner of his childhood.

But aren't we all?

FOOTSCRIPT

Since this essay was written, the piece which inspired it, "Sounding Brass, Tinkling Cymbal", has been reprinted in Andrew Porter's *Algol*, together with a tailpiece by Silverberg — 600 words or so — dated October 1975 and announcing his retirement from the writing of s f.

Despite the application of those techniques he has relied on far too heavily, and despite the verbiage circling the point, the facts pierce through that he is retiring because:

(a) his popularity, as shown by sales, is waning;

(b) he has not received the critical acclaim to which he feels entitled. I quote:

I did, after all, manage to write *Tower of Glass*, *Downward to the Earth*, *Son of Man*, *Dying Inside*, *The Book of Skulls*, *To Live Again*, *Hawkbill Station*, *Nightwings*, and *A Time of Changes*, books which helped in some measure to shape current American s f. If you think it's cowardly of me to throw in the towel consider those nine titles for a moment — and then consider that not one of them is in print in the United States as I write this epilogue today.

I doubt that any of them helped shape American s f; they followed fashion rather than led it and struck out in no viable new directions. There was never a distinctive Silverberg style, only those damnable exhibitions of technique smothering style. There is no longevity in those nine books.

It must be plain that I write in a species of cool anger — the anger of a writer who sees another "throw in the towel" at the moment when he needs to review his career and his methods and attack literature afresh, eyes opened in honest reappraisal.

Silverberg's novels have been ruined by his early career as a hack. Obsessed with technique, he has never learned that symbiosis of theme and storyline which is at the root of all memorable fiction, each supporting and demonstrating the other. The result has been theme cheapened by melodrama instead of drama created by theme. He has used technique as a method of overcoming difficulties, whereas technique is only *one* of the tools a writer uses in clearing the approaches to difficulties which must, eventually, be met head on. His individuality, the memorable part of him, has been obscured by fireworks.

Only yesterday I came, most unexpectedly, on a copy of his non-fiction work, *The Realm of Prester John*, in a Melbourne bookshop. I stood and read the first two pages, then bought the book — because those two pages revealed that Silverberg, given proper preparation and ordering of material, can write the kind of prose that takes and holds you at once. Clear, straightforward, unembellished, accurate, *informational* prose. Fiction, with only a little emotional structuring, should be written the same way. With the sole exceptions of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, all the really memorable fiction has been written so.

You don't think so? Then look again at the work of such highly individual stylists as J.G. Ballard, Thomas Disch, Ursula Le Guin, Michael Moorcock, and Gene Wolfe. These are in the top flight of s f's stylists (that I don't care for Moorcock's stories is neither here nor there) and all of them write simple, easy prose. Oh, there are subtleties, but these tend to spring from an author's individuality rather than from intensive technical planning.

Silverberg *can* write well — even as well as he seems to wish he could. *The Realm of Prester John* proves it, whereas his fiction indicates it only as a possibility.

So, as a writer who loves his trade and his fellow-tradesmen, I permit myself some cool anger.

George Turner
October 1975

March 1976

Robert Silverberg THE NOVELS

REVIVAL TIME Bruce Gillespie

Bruce Gillespie reviews
Recalled to Life
(Gollancz; 1974; 184 pages; 2 Pound)

Recalled to Life appeared first in 1958. Updated by Silverberg and re-released in 1974 in England, it has not survived very well.

Recalled to Life begins as a promising enough book. James Harker, a retired Governor of New York, receives an offer from Beller Laboratories to act as public relations man. The staff of Beller Laboratories demonstrate to Harker that they can resuscitate creatures which have been dead for as long as twenty-four hours. Moreover, they have developed techniques to heal patients newly dead from most known causes of deaths, including death by accident. Patients who receive aid quickly enough are assured of an indefinitely prolonged life.

Robert Silverberg has an obsession about death, or rather, about the possibilities for immortality. This obsession pokes out of nearly all the books that he has written during recent years. The trouble with *Recalled to Life* is that in it Robert Silverberg does not really consider problems of immortality at all. Instead, he attempts a task which is both more limited and more difficult — he tries to write the story of the man who must convince the world to accept immortality. I think that Silverberg fails particularly in this task.

For instance, Harker is a fairly limited sort of person. As the author notes in the novel, "generally the course of his life had been serene". He has risen to the top without considering any serious doubts about the direction of his life. He has an understanding wife and nice kids. He was forced to resign his Governorship after he had defended a matter of principle in the party room. But this episode seems only to have convinced him of his opinions in general, rather than leading him to any re-examination of his straitlaced attitudes. This enforced self-assessment comes only when he encounters his new "job".

The crew at Beller Laboratories are also a limited lot, but for a different reason. Silverberg gives everything away when he writes about one of them: "Thin, slab-jawed, scrawny Klaus seemed almost a parody of the supposed image of the scientific prodigy." This is all he is — a parody. But this is not a humorous book, so he appears as a stock figure from the most traditional s.f. The others at Beller are much the same — the "goodies" such as Raymond, who wants to perfect the resuscitation technique before releasing details or begging for extra funds; and the "baddies", who want their share of the limelight and possible profits before the product has been proved.

Faced by this forest of stick figures, Harker soon looks wooden himself. When he hears

about the technique, Harker "sat perfectly still, and it seemed to him he could hear the blood pumping in his own veins and the molecules of air crashing against his eardrums." If he has eardrums sensitive enough to register the collision of molecules, he would do best to donate them to the Beller Laboratories.

The trouble is that Silverberg is not kidding when he writes such absurd sentences. He really seems to think that this is dramatically effective writing. Later, when Harker sees, for the first time, a man brought back to life, "The shock reaction was violent, shattering and brief. Harker quivered uncontrollably and felt a painful chill, as his pores opened." This is thoroughly bad writing, a parody of itself. If Silverberg had attempted to write a funny book, he could have done a great job with this material. But everybody in *Recalled to Life* suffers from the "grinding teeth" syndrome; they are so boringly solemn that we wonder how they ever had enough intelligence to tie their shoe-laces, let alone invent resuscitation techniques.

In particular, Silverberg throws away the opportunity to make *Recalled to Life* into a real social comedy. In this book, page after page transcribes press reactions to every stage of the controversy about resuscitation. When the renegade members of Beller announce their findings prematurely, reporters and tv cameramen appear as "an invading army ... sweeping toward the labs." The first press release says, "Security wraps today came off an eight-year-old project that is destined to be the greatest boon to mankind since the birth of modern medical science. A process for bringing dead people back to life has left the experimental stage and is now ready for public demonstration . . ." Time after time, Silverberg transcribes these media clichés exactly, without any evaluation. Reporters at press conferences ask all the expected cross questions. Harker receives thousands of crank letters, each showing uniform ignorance about the issues raised.

A friend of mind collects absurdities from newspapers and magazines. These sources are their own parodies. At the very least, Silverberg could have adopted the same attitude and shown how ludicrously the world might react to resurrection. But he lets everything die on the page. Harker takes everything so solemnly, and Silverberg does not question Harker's viewpoint. The whole world desiccates into a forest of stick figures, including people whom Harker consults, such as Monsignor Cartaret, and his ever-patient wife.

Harker insists on consulting the Powers That Be before accepting resuscitation himself. Once convinced, he regards everybody else as wrong-headed. Among the opponents of the scheme, only the "patriarchal" figures, such as Senator Thurman, give him any interest. Harker places most other people in various pigeon-holes of varying worthlessness. He fails to object when Barchet, one of the "baddies", is not revived, but reacts with horror, in other parts of the book, to the scurrilous acts of his enemies.

Harker is believable enough, within these limits, but we cannot sympathise with him, which seems to be the author's intention. When Silverberg sympathises with so many self-righteous, unoriginal characters, he creates mere melodrama no better than that shown on network television. The dialogue is as banal as television dialogue. Because the characters are so predictable, the action of the book reminds us most of any episode of a tv "drama". Scientists discover life-after-death; scientists disagree; one lot of scientists runs off and releases information about the process; press descends; government descends; people are kidnapped, hoodwinked, etc; good-hearted hero seeks The Solution, etc. This book depends for its effects almost entirely on the plot: almost nothing unexpected happens.

Recalled to Life does most damage to the idea which gives it its title. Everybody is so worried about his or her part in the public spectacle (which is why this should have been a fiercely funny book) that nobody worries much about whether people should be brought to life in this way. Most of the characters worry only about potential mechanical hitches. Silverberg has the opportunity to re-write this novel in the post-Christian-Barnard era of life extension, but his characters do not even ask the kind of searching questions which even the most facile media commentators have asked about heart transplants or intensive care units: Is the cost worth the results? Because of an inevitable lack of resources, upon what basis do we choose people to receive special treatment? At what stage does life extension become immortality of any or all of its members?

In other words, there's a whole novel waiting inside *Recalled to Life*, but still-born. Maybe Robert Silverberg can write it some day, when he stops resurrecting platitudes and applauding pompous megalomaniacs like Harker.

Gollancz did not do a favour to themselves or to Silverberg when they revived *Recalled to Life*. Since I dislike most of Silverberg's recent work, I was disappointed to find that at least one of his novels was no better back in 1958. If you like the decorations with which Silverberg camouflages his present work, you might be very disappointed to find how bare this Emperor of the s.f. world looks without his new clothes.

Bruce Gillespie
March 1974

ONLY A FAIRY TALE Stanislaw Lem

Translated by WERNER KOOPMAN

Stanislaw Lem reviews
A Time of Changes
(Signet O4729; 1971; 220 pages; 95c).
This review appeared first in *Quarber Merkur* 31.

This Nebula Award-winning novel by Silverberg is an interesting phenomenon. To use a clinical term, here we have a pathognomic classical case which allows us to study what is typical in current science fiction.

True, the story is set against a background that is likely to be repugnant to those who still can remember their youth: the background is a milieu of a planetary aristocracy of septarchs, marquises, and other members of the nobility, who are a constant in the universe, it would seem. For once, there is a problem of the first magnitude buried in this milieu. On the planet Bortham, the remote descendants of terrestrial emigrants have created a civilisation where individuality is strongly negated and silenced. This affects even the language because, on this planet, all ego-centred words are forbidden. It isn't proper to say, "my, myself, I"; you must use the neutral form ("one is glad" instead of "I am glad", etc.). Furthermore, it is forbidden to speak with other people about your personal life. If nevertheless somebody wants to communicate with another human being, he is obliged to hire the services of a "drainer", a religious specialist, whose duty it is, for a certain fee, to listen to your confession and never to divulge anything heard, much like a Catholic priest. Only a small fraction of private affairs may also be communicated to other people, and then only to "cultural relatives" — not blood relatives, but so-called "bond-sisters" and "bondbrothers".

For the hero, this civilisation turns gradually into an unbearable prison, especially because secretly he has fallen in love with his "bond-sister" — a relationship which is strictly taboo. Small wonder therefore that the hero should be unable to resist the temptations of an alien, a terrestrial named Shweiz, who supplies him with a drug of quite extraordinary properties. If two human beings take this drug simultaneously, the experience a *communio spiritualis* which unites their souls as well as their memories. The result is a marvellous Platonic love for your fellow human beings.

The problem is this: Is it allowed to attack a rigid, even inhuman, civilisation by means of a drug? Is the hero of this novel a progressive freedom fighter or an abominable drug addict, who wants to turn all other humans into drug addicts?

In our times, the antithesis "civilisation/drugs" is a real problem. The problem with Silverberg's novel is only that it does not contain a civilisation, nor a drug in it. For this simple reason, it is impossible to discuss seriously the problem that seems so important and meaningful. That is, there is a civilisation in the novel, and also a drug, but both are of a kind that can be encountered only in fairy-tales. One cannot change the concepts of "civilisation" and "drug" at liberty, without recognising any limits. If such things were allowed, it would be possible to include all possibilities by changing the concepts that go along with them, just as it occurs to you. For instance, it is quite superfluous to make a decision about which is better: should I use blue magic or red magic against an aggressor? On the planet Bortham, there is no civilisation, as it is understood by anthropology or sociology, but only an enchantment of the human "ego". The only means of defeating this enchantment is a spell, which the author prefers to call a "drug". Therefore the question which the book really asks is: Is it allowed to use an evil spell against an evil enchantment? Although this problem could be discussed, obviously it has no meaning as soon as we try to transfer it from the world of the fairy-tale into our real world. For, in our world, all enchantments, magic, and wizardry have exactly the same value — which is to say, none.

Silverberg has a habit of borrowing various things from genres close to s f — and he pretends that not only fairy tales but also the typical clichés of the Western are s f (which has

been proven by Sam J Lundwall in *Science Fiction — What It's All About*, where he re-translates a story of Silverberg's back into "Westernese". He needed only to restore the "six-shooter" for the "blaster", the V-Leggs became Comanches again, and the "pink monster" a horse).

But why should such masquerades and borrowings be forbidden in s f? If it is permissible for Thomas Mann to introduce the mythic paradigm of the Faustus myth into his great novel *Dr Faustus*, why should an s f author not be allowed to do the same with fairy-tales? How can we dare to pronounce such a procedure as nonsense, or even cheating?

The answer is very simple. It is allowable to unite realistic and mythical narrative patterns when the author does not undertake this proceeding secretly, but admits his intention, as is obvious from Mann's novel, whose very title acknowledges its relationship with the Faustus myth. The meaning of such a work is then established on two levels. The tensions which arise between the well-known paradigm and the plot form the real field of problems, as the author fully intended. But if the paradigmatic structure is "borrowed" in a hidden way, and is not supposed to be recognised for what it is, because the author pretends that it is something else altogether, the process of rendering the problems of civilisation as fiction amounts to a disqualification of the work, as soon as we recognise the original skeleton of the "borrowed" structure. If an author can turn a Western into a pseudo-s f, or change a fairy-tale telling of various enchantments into a story claiming to incorporate anthropological dilemmas, only by introducing new terms in a superficial way, then he wishes us to remain unaware of what he has done. This is "generic incest", an attempt to cheat the reader, and the story remains effective only as long as we do not recognise the true state of things.

The question remains to be answered: How does it come about that the ontology of the fairy-tale is passed off for an ontology of the real world? — the fairy-tale (i.e. what is never possible) for a real problem? What is the origin of the belief that the mechanical substitution of certain terms, that the exchange of fairy-tale problems for "real" problems can tell us anything original about civilisation? To put it bluntly: Why does this stubborn mystification continue, perpetrated not only by one author who, as an individual, can always err, but by a High Jury, that is, the Science Fiction Writers of America, whose members have sanctioned this mystification with a prize? Don't these thinkers understand that they do s f the worst disservice by making a public exhibition of their collective blindness in elementary questions of art? That Silverberg's novel, if they did admire it, should have been given an award as a fairy-tale, but not as s f? If they give the Nebula Award to a naively camouflaged fairy-tale, this "honour" becomes only a source of self-ridicule for the whole genre, which isn't even aware of what it is really doing.

GIVE US FER-TIL-I-TEE!

by Paul Anderson

Paul Anderson reviews
The World Inside
(Doubleday; 1971; 201 pages; \$4.95)

This novel is set in the year 2381 when, as the blurb says, "Man has attained Utopia. War, starvation, crime and birth control have been eliminated." This is Silverberg's attempt to depict a society with an extremely large population. However, compared with similar efforts by Brunner, he relates this world to ours with only one slight reference — where one character wonders how we could have actually tried to limit our population growth in any way!

In *The World Inside*, Man has reached the Golden Age, when he has solved all of his problems and can now live truly at peace with his neighbours. But, of course, he has no real choice in the matter. Each Urban Monad has a population in excess of 800,000 people, so there is no room left for such ancient quirks of human nature as jealousy. It seems that the last vestiges of the old puritan outlook on life have been removed, and that Silverberg has created a new social structure to take its place. However, this new structure does not entirely lack faults. Our "family unit" of two parents and a number of children remains, but this society also has free love of all kinds. The prime directive of the new order is to praise God by creating as much life as is humanly possible. Those who have the most children (or "littles", as they are called) become the most "blessworthy", or religiously faithful. The creed is expressed neatly in the little verse with which Carles Mattern's littles greet the dawn in the "happy day in 2381":

God bless, god bless, god bless!

God bless us every one!

God bless Daddo, god bless Mommo, god bless you and me!

God bless us all, the short and tall,

Give us fer-til-i-tee!

This creed gains its practical expression in the quaint practice of "nightwalking": any person has the right to access to any other person in the Monad, whether male or female. Only a few taboos restrict this activity. No person is allowed to refuse and, although the complementary practice of homosexuality would seem to reduce fertility, evidently the overall result is to mix the gene supply of each urbmon and increase the population. For instance, Jason Quevedo, a throwback to an earlier age, tortures himself with desires for the twin brother of his beautiful wife:

Now and again Jason feels sexually drawn to his brother-in-law. It is a natural attraction, considering the physical pull Michael has always exerted on him . . . Not since the rough easy days of boyhood has he had any kind of sexual intercourse with his own sex. He will not permit it. There are no penalties for such things, naturally.

Through Jason's experience, we also see other differences between life as it is now and life in Urbmon 116. He is one of the happy people but he is also a historian by profession, and his reactions to the world inside show more about him than they do about the final solution of the population problem.

The novel has no real main character; Silverberg uses each character in turn to depict "the happy life", compared with the agrarian life of the farmers who live on the vast empty spaces between the urbmons. These spaces are used to provide the urbmons with their food supplies and the farmers are employed to tend the large machines which cultivate and harvest the crops. Their way of life seems primitive for people entrusted with such a responsibility for such a world. Life outside the Urbmons is almost the direct opposite of that inside — but no more or less appealing. It is noticeable that, in this section of the book, Silverberg abandons his "new", slick style with its kaleidoscope of ideas, and relies on an earlier style.

The World Inside implies that this society is held together by the systematic elimination of all who do not conform to the State-inspired collection of taboos and religious dogmas designed to keep most people in a mindless state of bliss, ever ready to do the blessworthy thing.

It is evident that Silverberg has put more into writing this panoramic view of a crowded society than he did into the flawed *Tower of Glass* — so much so that I do not think of it so much as a new novel by Robert Silverberg, but more a way of life.



EXULTANT DECADENCE Van Ikin

Van Ikin reviews *To Live Again* (Sidgwick & Jackson; 1975; 231 pages; \$A8.75; original US publication 1969).

Robert Silverberg's career has taken some interesting turns lately. Thematically, his recent novels have shown a preoccupation with death, as in the revision of *Recalled to Life* and the two novellas "Going" and "Born With the Dead". Stylistically, he seems to have been experimenting. *Recalled to Life* was written in straight narrative form to create an enthralling sense of suspense (I recollect that my review of the book for Sydney University's *Union Recorder* ended with the declaration that it was "the most suspenseful book I have ever read"); the two novellas were written in a fragmented narrative style, allowing the author more freedom to explore character and situation; and many of the stories in *Unfamiliar Territory* also reveal an increasing interest in experimentation.

To Live Again squares with both these tendencies. It is a novel about death, and I feel that — for Silverberg — its style is experimental. The novel's form lies somewhere between the tight, straight narrative of *Recalled to Life* and the quasi-picaresque "soap opera" format of the television shows, *Certain Women* and *No. 96*. Let me hasten to add, though,

that I use the latter term (and the latter analogy) only in a non-perjorative descriptive sense: "soap opera" is as much a legitimate literary form as street theatre or the thriller; all are "populist" forms in their different ways. Like most soap operas, *To Live Again* is replete with plot — an incident-laden, surprising, twisting plot — and stocked with a large cast of characters. (Some of these characters are actually "personae" carried around — literally — inside the other characters, but even the personae have recognisable identities.) Such a form is dictated by the novel's ambition to achieve panorama — to create a story that naturally allows the author the "elbow room" to delineate a future society and comment upon that society's values.

The book's central theme is the notion that, in the near future, the mind (or "persona") of a dead person will be able to be preserved on tape and then transferred into the body of a living person. Within this future world, two men control immense power: Mark Kaufmann, inheritor of the financial empire left by his late uncle, Paul Kaufmann, and the shrewd little self-made Greek millionaire, John Roditis. With Paul Kaufmann dead, Roditis and Mark Kaufmann enter into a struggle to obtain Paul's persona (and thus his knowledge and know-how) through the mind-implanting Scheffing Process. Roditis seeks the persona in order

to win social status (the one thing his self-made wealth can't buy him) and Mark opposes him primarily to uphold the aristocratic tradition and to deny such prestige to the newly rich.

A number of subplots complicate this pattern: Mark's capricious mistress, Elena Volterra, becomes involved in the power play; Mark's promiscuous daughter, Risa, takes on her first persona and is then ordered by the persona to "find out how I really died"; and Roditis' loyal but spineless henchman, Noyes, fights off the aggressive persona of James Kravchenko, which threatens to "go dybbuk" and take over Noyes' conscious being. Unless one is of the school that sneers at plot *per se*, it must be admitted that Silverberg's plot is superbly ingenious.

The novel's theme is concerned with cultural quality. The protagonists live in a technologically advanced, distinctly "Western" culture, the symbols of this culture being the Scheffing Process and the wealth of men like Roditis and Kaufmann. Yet the novel also suggests that this culture is divided within itself. Thus Kaufmann and Roditis represent warring value-systems within the economic monolith, and the society at large is divided between, on the one hand, an all-out acceptance of the spiritually sterile but materially prosperous path of scientific progress and, on the other hand, a wavering attitude which seeks to mask technology with a veneer of spiritualism.

Unable to reject their gods completely, certain sections of the culture attempt to blend old and new. The advent of the Scheffing Process leads to such a revival of interest in the *Bardo Thodol*, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, that it becomes the cult book of a new religion. But it is a perverted religion — a religion which exists not to seek ultimate truth but rather to make the Scheffing Process acceptable to those of queasy mind. The *Bardo Thodol* teaches that true nirvana lies in an *end* to life:

He who lacketh discrimination, whose mind is unsteady and whose heart is impure, never reacheth the goal, but is born again. But he who hath discrimination, whose mind is steady and whose heart is pure, reacheth the goal, and having reached it is born no more.

According to the true teaching, rebirth is undesirable and freedom from the wheel of existence is the highest goal. The new cult manages to ignore this aspect of the teaching, using the Book of the Dead as a metaphysical crutch on which to hobble towards acceptance of the chance to be reborn. Ironically, rebirth is available only to those with money and power (for the poor there are pleasure islands like Jubilisle, places where "those who could not buy rebirth . . . could purchase distraction") and with the general cultural trend towards unevaluated scientific progress, but also with the specifically capitalistic aspects of the society. To use Marxist terminology, the people are perverting "the opiate of the people" in order to accept a new and far-reaching facet of capitalism.

Men like Roditis reject such pseudo-religious self-deception, being able to see — and accept — the Scheffing Process for what it is. Thinking about the two personae within his own being, Roditis muses on their rejection of "Oriental foolishness":

Had they hungered for nirvana's sweet oblivion? Of course not! They had bided their time in cold storage, and now they walked the world again, passengers in a busy, well-stocked, active mind. Roditis would leave nirvana to real Buddhists. He preferred the Westernised version of the creed.

As the above quotation indicates, Silverberg is not merely juxtaposing superstitious weakness with Roditis' brand of harsh honesty. Those who dabble in the *Bardo Thodol* may

incur authorial scepticism because of their dishonesty, but there also seems to be authorial concern about the morality of the situation that Roditis accepts so readily. Roditis' musings are strangely equivocal: it is a person's "soul" that bides its time in "cold storage", that ultimately becomes nothing more than a "passenger" in a brain that is described in terms of a supermarket commercial. And what about the notion of a "Westernised version of the creed"? Does this phrase (with its capital "W") hint that the cult of westernisation has grown to the point where bastardisation is acceptable if it wears a "Westernised" face?

As if to epitomise these equivocations, certain passages in the novel make a definite statement about the quality and morality of the Scheffing Process culture. The most vivid of these is a single sentence almost dropped in passing:

Overhead, three huge brown pelicans wheeled and folded their wings, plummeting into the water to snatch up fish; they had been treated with adrenergic drugs . . . so they'd stay hungry all afternoon and stage a good show for the guests.

Similarly, the country's pseudo-Tibetan lamaseries (all of which have sprung up as a result of the new cult) are commercially tainted. They give out samples of their publications, and wax hypocritically lavish with their blessings and goodwill upon receipt of a million-dollar donation. Even marriage has succumbed to the god of materialistic advancement:

That was the fashionable sort of marriage these days, rapidly creating a tribe of Anglo-Saxon Hebrews whose formidable bloodlines linked them securely to Plan-tagenets on one hand, Solomon and David on the other, an unbeatable combination.

Each of these facts makes a telling point about the culture it typifies, but underneath the moral overtone, there is a kind of exultant joy in each of these barbs, as if Silverberg enjoyed dreaming up these examples of cultural impurity. He seems to admire the decadence (the *ingenious* decadence) of the society he is criticising. He might not approve of the drugged pelican, but nevertheless he cannot help admiring the inventiveness that motivates the drugging. It's the old story of the moralist drooling away as he records, in loving detail, the terrible sins of Sodom. Silverberg does not drool, and he's not setting up a black-and-white God-and-Sodom contrast, but he *is* caught between his own contrary attitudes.

This love-hate relationship extends to the Scheffing Process as well, and it is here that it becomes a fault rather than just a revealing little foible. In terms of personal opinion, Silverberg seems unable to decide whether he approves or disapproves of the process; in terms of literary style and structure, he seems unable to distance himself sufficiently from his (and his characters') accounts of the process. When Risa takes Tandy Cushing as her first persona, there follows a honeymoon-like period in which the two girls plumb each other's store of experience:

She knew now the sensations of lying naked to couple in the Antarctic snows. She tasted strange cocktails in a hotel on the slopes of Everest. She experiences orgasm in free fall. She quarrelled with lovers, raked their faces with clawed hands, kissed away the salty tricklings of blood.

Gradually Risa perceives that it will not take very long to exhaust Tandy's stock of experiences:

Oh, there would always be interesting formative events to return to, yes, and there would always be the useful presence of a second mind within hers, but Risa knew that the present keen stimulation of having Tandy with her would wear off in a year or two, and their relationship would settle into coziness, a marriage that had consumed its

passion. Tandy simply did not have the complexity of personality that would permit indefinite mining of her experiences, colorful as those experiences had been. By the time Risa reached Tandy's final age, she would be far beyond the point Tandy had reached at her death.

Then it would be time to add another persona.

No single attitude to the Scheffing Process emerges from this account. The early period of mind-exploration seems to be viewed as a worthwhile activity because it expands Risa's awareness and increases her store of experience. Yet her thoughts about Tandy's replacement surely emphasise the moral flaw in the process by stressing the fact that it treats people — personae, *souls* — as cheap merchandise. Tandy is not a person, she is an interlude — a toy to be used, discarded, replaced. "Then it would be time to add another persona": the phrase gives rise to a number of moral misgivings. Yet it also touches a nerve of fantasy fulfilment, for Risa's realisation that she can explore persona after persona is like a child's discovery that his father's wealth gives him the run of the world's toyshops.

Such ambiguities are never resolved, and the lack of resolution weakens the book by depriving it of a moral touchstone. (Without knowing whether the process is conceived of as being "good" or "bad", one cannot evaluate characters and situations by their involvement with the process. Moreover, the book's wide scope — in terms of characters, incidents, scenes, moods, institutions, and so forth — cries out for the kind of nodal certainty that a resolved attitude would provide.)

Yet, paradoxically, the lack of resolution gives the book a richness. It dramatises the dilemma of the western world, dramatises the difficulty of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of scientific progress. Thus the reader is left with the quaint feeling that he has been cheated of the necessary satisfaction of resolution and finality, but that this has allowed him to glimpse the novel's central themes in all their rich complexity.

The same win-a-little, lose-a-little verdict applies to prose style. In this regard, *To Live Again* is simply average. There is the occasional snippet of finely honed prose:

His body, at thirty-seven, was tight-muscled and solid, a compact bullet of flesh still travelling unswervingly on its designed trajectory.

— but, in general, the writing is competent rather than exciting:

Within the cool depths of the car, Roditis flecked perspiration from his corrugated brow and regarded the other man uneasily. He was growing more and more worried about Noyes, who perhaps was becoming a risky liability . . . The car purred to a halt in the gravelly parking oval adjoining the lamasery. The men got out.

We've all read of cars "purring", people "growing" worried. There's nothing distinctive in the use of perspiration to suggest anxiety, and "the men got out" is hardly a vivid description. As one would expect of so plot-heavy a novel, there is no time for verbal virtuosity. *To Live Again* must be appreciated for the broader aspects of plot and dramatisation rather than for the minutiae of arresting images and punchy sentences.

Despite any drawbacks, the novel is aggressively *interesting*. Its elaborately intricate plot commands attention and admiration, its thematic obliquities are a source of constant intellectual stimulation, and there is the continual feeling that the soap-opera form represents an attempt to open up new (but not radically new) modes for Silverberg's future writings. *To Live Again* is worth a few hours of your life . . .



The Dying Inside Debate

Don D'Amassa and Bruce Gillespie present differing views of Dying Inside (Scribner's; 1972; 245 pages; \$6.95. Available more recently from Ballantine U.S.A.)

**INSIDE
DYING
INSIDE**

**Don
D'Amassa**

(This review appeared first in *Mythologies* 3, Dec 74/Jan 75, edited by Don D'Amassa, 19 Angell Drive, East Providence, Rhode Island 02914, USA).

Robert Silverberg's novel, *Dying Inside*, is a radical departure from the normal subject matter found in SF novels. There have been many stories dealing with telepathy in the past — Blish's *Esper*, Shiras' *Children of the Atom*, Brunner's *The Whole Man*, and Bestler's *The Demolished Man*, just to name a few — but each has concerned either the uses to which these powers are put by individuals or societies, or the manner in which society or an individual adjusts or fails to adjust to their presence. In *Dying Inside*, the central character must adjust to the loss of his telepathic powers, and society never becomes aware of their existence at all.

This turnabout in plot is not the sole unique element in the novel. The plot itself is a relatively insignificant element. The scraps of story-line serve only to underscore or illustrate the points which Silverberg makes about his character, David Selig. The novel's lack of chronological arrangement reflects this de-concentration on plot in favour of character.

David Selig is a forty-one-year-old telepathic mind-reader who must look on helplessly as his powers fade slowly. He has never been able to project thoughts, but only to receive them, and now even this ability is waning. Selig is culturally Jewish, but religiously uncommitted. His parents are dead; his adopted sister Judith is a divorcee with a young son. There is a long-standing hostility between Selig and his sister, now fading, but apparently being replaced by avid dislike on the part of his nephew. Selig holds a series of brief jobs, and supports himself eventually by ghost-writing papers for undergraduates at Columbia University. He has a series of mistresses, two of whom, Toni and Kitty, he professes to love. At one point, he encounters another secret telepath, Tom Nyquist but he never likes the man and soon their acquaintance is abrogated.

Selig is a study in self-contradiction, a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, ego and humility, shame and pride. When speaking of his childhood, he tells us that "everyone agreed that he was a brilliant child". Despite his brilliance, he supports himself as a parasite and takes perverse pride in his ghost-written works, calling them "glib, earnest, profound in a convincingly sophomoric way". His service to the undergrads is, naturally, the "quickest and most reliable".

As his powers decline, Selig is forced to rely increasingly on normal sources of information about the people with whom he must deal. On more than one occasion, he expresses dissatisfaction that he is being reduced to the level of ordinary mortals. He spends hours composing lengthy letters to great thinkers in various fields, indulging his fantasy of intellectual superiority.

While making love to one of his mistresses, Selig explores her mind, saying afterward, "I feel a little guilty about the casual way I slammed into her head, no regard for her privacy at all. But I have my needs." He can casually brush aside the rights of others when they conflict with his own desires. As a child, he had wished his infant sister dead even before the enmity was reciprocated, even to the point of trying to use his power to kill her. In his adult life, he attempts to remake Kitty to his own specifications, imagining himself as Pygmalion. Her interests have always been in the sciences and his in the arts, so he considers her "as not having read anything at all".

Selig is also an intellectually pretentious man. He quotes frequently from Eliot, Shakespeare, Whitman, Browning, Marlowe, Wiener, Thoreau, Tennyson, Huxley, Beckett, Kafka, and others. During the course of the book, he refers casually to his familiarity with the

works of over seventy-five other writers, composers, poets, artists, philosophers, and social thinkers. Contrarily, Selig often expresses contempt for himself as a voyeur, a freak, odd, a dumb schmuck, a schmendrick, a neurotic, and a failure. He admits to self-loathing and self-pity on many occasions; in fact, "Selig" itself is German for "pitiful". "I find my own company wearisome," says Selig, "when I descend into self-pity." But, "I've got a lot to pity myself for." At one point, Tom Nyquist recognises this and asks, "Why don't you like yourself, Selig?" While under the influence of LSD, Selig sees himself as "a crouching, huddled bloodsucker", but withdraws from recognition of this and insists that the image originates in the mind of his current mistress, Toni.

Kitty appears to be immune to mind-reading when they first meet, giving rise to speculation by Nyquist that she may be a latent telepath with the ability to block. Selig reacts strongly to this possibility, insisting that "she's a sane, healthy, well-balanced, absolutely normal girl. Therefore she's no mind reader." By obvious implication, it follows that Selig is insane, or at least insane, unhealthy, unbalanced, and abnormal, since he is a mind reader.

Selig's feelings about interpersonal communication are also ambiguous. On the one hand, he longs for the ability to develop meaningful, lasting relationships with others, particularly with Toni and Kitty, yet he never attempts to recognise their points of view, or those of his sister and parents. He tells us that "his growing bitterness, his sour sense of isolation, damped his capacity for joy." He recognises that this alienation may well be the major problem in his personality: "The problem is that I feel isolated from other human beings." At the same time, he feels not entirely responsible for the gap in communication, describing his attempts as "unilateral efforts at making contact with a deaf world".

Nyquist points out to Selig that he is not altogether honest with himself, that the lack of interpersonal success is partly of his own making: "What scares you is contact, any sort of contact." Selig minimises this, while still admitting to hating his infant sister "instantly", to having driven Kitty away by his attempts to dominate her life, to despising and fearing Nyquist from the beginning. But Selig's isolation is not entirely a result of either his power or his fear of personal interdependence; it is at least partly intellectual.

Like members of any generation, Selig has been affected by things which occurred in his environment which were independent of his influence. As a college student, he became embittered because he saw the United States as "dumping napalm on everything in sight for the sake of promoting peace and democracy" in Vietnam. But Selig was equally disillusioned by the excesses of protest. "It was then that I knew there could be no hope for mankind, when even the best of us were capable of going berserk in the cause of love and peace and human equality."

Selig blames his telepathic ability for preventing him from functioning gregariously. He describes it as "a useless gift", compares it with an addictive drug, and insists that "It never did me any good anyway." Judith, who knows of his power, argues that "without it you might have been someone quite ordinary." To this he replies that "with it I turned out to be someone quite ordinary. A nobody, a zero. Without it I might have been a happy nobody instead of a dismal one." It has become obvious that Selig is using his telepathy as a scapegoat, blaming all of his personal failures on an ability that he never asked for, rather than accept that he may himself be responsible for his failures and unhappiness.

There is more than a little justification in Selig's comparison of his power to a drug, because the "power brought ecstasy", and Selig uses it compulsively. To a great extent, telepathy is the one unique aspect of his life, and this is a point that, when he is being honest with himself, Selig admits: "On the other hand, without the power, what are you?" Now that his power is fading, he feels guilty, as though he had squandered the gift. Despite over thirty years of telepathic eavesdropping, Selig has never been able to use it to improve his own life or that of the people he has known. Nyquist, on the contrary, has developed methods through which his power supports him comfortably. There is no reason to believe that Selig could not have done the same, had he really wanted to.

If Selig was correct in ascribing his alienation to his telepathy, cessation of one would mean cessation of the other. This is not the case. Selig recognises that "silence is coming over me. I will speak to no one after it's gone. And no one will speak to me." He fails to draw the inescapable conclusion that his exclusion from normal human intercourse was not the result of his abilities, but of his inabilities.

The theme of guilt pervades the entire book. His feelings don't prevent him from eavesdropping in the minds of casual acquaintances, but he avoids reading those of the people to whom he is attached, however remotely. He believes that his power "darkens the soul". Commenting on the frequency with which Selig washes his hands, he asks himself, "What is it, do you think, that he's trying to wash away?"

There is clear evidence that Selig recognises the dichotomy in his personality. He quotes Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes." He refers to himself as being "of two minds" about losing his power. In fact, often he refers to the power as a separate entity living parasitically within him, which spurs Nyquist to say, "That's schizoid, man, setting up a duality like that." The idea that Selig's suffering is unique is simply another manifestation of his overwhelming egocentricity: "I must suffer because I am different, but by way of compensation the entire universe will revolve around me."

There is further evidence that Selig may be suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. He identifies with the central character in Kafka's *The Trial*, who discovers that there is absolutely no possibility of his acquittal. He also identifies himself and Judith with Orestes and Electra, and assumes their guilt.

As a young boy, Selig felt that "spies were everywhere, probing for young Selig's secret, fishing for the awful truth about him." He discovers that Toni has a "predatory mouth". Under LSD, his paranoia takes solid form and he sees himself as a skulking vampire, hated by mankind. He decides that if people were ever to discover his secret, "I'd probably be lynched." At one point he says that God himself has singled out David Selig for persecution. Near the end of the book, he insists that, for all of his life, the power has "separated himself from himself".

The fact is that it is Selig, not his power, which drives people away from him. He hated his sister and despised his parents for no reason discernable. He projected his own paranoia onto Toni and destroyed their relationship. His dislike of Nyquist was easily detectable by the other. Kitty was driven away by Selig's failure to recognise that she too had needs. It even appears that the dislike he detected in his nephew was largely, if not entirely, a product of his own imagination.

Selig carries about with him an aura of gloom and pessimism. When Judith asks if he is in pain, he answers, "Who isn't in pain?" He

sums up his view of human destiny quite succinctly by stating that "things have a way of getting worse and worse all the time, until in the end they get so bad that we lack even the means of knowing how bad they really are."

Ultimately Selig accepts the loss of his power: "Whatever comes to you, accept." But it is a grudging acceptance and it only serves to increase his bitterness. "On some ultimate level I just don't give a damn at all. This is what I am . . . what I now shall be. If you don't like it, tough crap." At the same time, it appears that he is finally beginning to realise that it is he and not his power which has prevented personal happiness. "Maybe I'd have had the problems I have even if I hadn't been born with the gift . . . God knows there are plenty of neurotics around who have never read a mind in their lives."

Silverberg is sympathetic to Selig, even while carefully delineating his shortcomings. It is difficult to conceive of any writer devoting so much effort to the creation of a single character without realising a certain degree of kinship. He mentions, for example, that Judith had been a far more proficient hater than David. David was obviously insecure, spending much of his early life as the class clown, seeking attention while simultaneously fearing discovery. It could not have been a very happy childhood.

Less obvious is the thread of evidence showing Selig's identification with Christ, a paradoxical situation since he was raised as a Jew — but then, Christ was a Jew. Specifically he isolated himself from mortals and mortal pleasures. "Without the power he was nothing . . . with it he was a god." He refers to his telepathic power as "my wound". At the same time he denies the existence of a God. "Prayer? To whom? To what?" "Jews don't pray for favours, because they know nobody will answer." But it is Nyquist who tags him accurately: "You're a deeply religious man who doesn't happen to believe in God."

Dying Inside is likely to be criticised for its anti-hero character, its downbeat ending, and its slow pace. Selig is obviously not the stuff from which John Carters are made. But it is only in this type of character that we can see aspects of ourselves from an outside perspective. If Selig is an anti-hero, then we are all anti-heroes to a greater or lesser extent. *Dying Inside* is indeed slow paced, with little physical action. It is the gradual revelation of the many facets of Selig's character which occupies our attention.

The conclusion of the novel is only outwardly downbeat. Selig has lost his power, as expected, but he has gained in return. He has used his telepathy as an excuse for his misanthropy throughout his life; with the loss of this excuse, reconciliation with humanity is finally possible. There are clear indications that his relationship with Judith and her son Paul, are improving. Selig's insistence that people accept him as he is indicates the first stirring of his own self-acceptance. The shroud of paranoia with which he covered himself has not been removed, but its fabric has been rent. He has traded a power which gave the illusion of human contact for the ability to recognise and attain real contact.

Dying Inside did not win the Hugo, and Silverberg may go on to write a dozen better novels in the future. Nevertheless, David Selig — despise him, pity him, or sympathise with him — is probably the most fully realised single character yet to appear in the genre, and it is my bet that this novel will one day be credited retroactively as the first example of a new movement in s.f. Expansion of the horizons of s.f. in any direction is to be welcomed; in the direction of fuller humanity, it is long overdue.

The Dying Inside Debate

EMPTY INSIDE

Bruce Gillespie

You must admit that Bob Silverberg is a clever bloke. "I thought (*Dying Inside*) was a very good novel," he said at Aussiecon, "It was about the best novel I could do." At one stroke, the author has pre-empted the debate about one of his novels. In fact, he's made it pretty well impossible to talk about his book at all. To argue against the novel is now to argue against Silverberg the person — exactly the position no reviewer likes to be in. Also, I'm forced into the position of arguing against what Silverberg tried to do in *Dying Inside* instead of talking about what he actually achieved.

So the author has drawn up the court and written the book of rules. I will ignore one part of the game: I won't argue against Silverberg the person. But I will try to account for what Silverberg says he achieved — and I think he still loses the game.

* * * * *

The main quality I concede to *Dying Inside* is its ambitiousness.

By genre, it is a novel, just as Silverberg claims, and just as the publisher has written on the cover.

By genre, it is also a science fiction novel. Its main character is a telepath in a world of non-telepaths, and this single deviance from the "real world" is essential to the movement of the book.

There are signs that Silverberg is trying to write for an audience which does not read science fiction usually. We find a modified form of stream-of-consciousness technique; the casual reader of quality fiction is expected to recognise the many poetic allusions.

Within the s.f. world, many people have taken the signs of Silverberg's ambitiousness as a compliment to their own taste, and have praised the book highly. In general, *Dying Inside* was treated as the best s.f. book of 1972 by people who disliked everything else that appeared in that year.

But ambitiousness is not a guarantee of quality. It just makes it more difficult to pin down exactly the causes for one's own dissatisfaction — with that feeling the book leaves me with of seeing a huge, gaudy balloon deflate after a slow puncture.

The problem is that Silverberg has constructed the book in such a way that it is almost unchallengeable on literary grounds. The book is its main character. If we say that we don't like David Selig, Silverberg can say that we are merely objecting to the personal characteristics of the main character. Silverberg can claim that he has created an ironic means of disclaiming responsibility for whatever unpleasant reactions the book stirs in us. (But if we

like the book, we like the author's skill. Very clever.)

For really it is very difficult to like David Selig, the main character of *Dying Inside*. Maybe he does have a telepathic gift. Maybe he is a sensitive fellow who notices much of the underbelly of society which escapes the notice of other people. But he is mainly:

- * Self-pitying (he is moaning about his "weary, eroding brain" in even the first paragraph).
- * A name-dropper (Eliot's and Yeats' names on the first page).
- * Hysterical ("The dangling cables of the elevator hurl shrieks of mocking laughter at him").
- * Racist (particularly aware of the "swarming Puerto Ricans" who live in the same apartment building).
- * Male chauvinist (the neighbour Hispanic woman is only a "dull bitch"; most of his other expressed opinions about women are at only a physical or simplistic level).
- * Narcissistic/vain (how does the girl on the train see him?).
- * Opportunistic but petty (his current only source of income is to ghost-write class papers for students at Columbia University).

And that's what we discover in the first few pages.

But Silverberg might say that he knows just how despicable is David Selig; he realises that he crucifies his main character with every thought from that unlovely mind. But he's not one of those self-congratulatory pricks you find in all those *other* s.f. books, is he? He's not trying to conquer the universe, is he? And face up to it; he's *you* as well.

Why turn away in disgust?, Silverberg might say to us; why not place the mirror in front of our own faces?

Well, I do, and I still don't see a reflection. Bits of me, yes, and a few shards of other people. But the author has left the silver coating off the back of the mirror.

The trouble is that we must always go back to David Selig, who is complex and irritating enough to remain memorable. He is such a total bastard, so exactly the sort of person to avoid by miles, that we come almost to admire him. He works so hard at self-laceration — ruinous love affairs, rejecting women, hating parents, severing even the most fleeting emotional ties, and whining, whining, whining about the loss of his "gift".

But is David Selig a true fictional character? Is he an individual? Do we actually get to know him?

I don't think so. It's true that we are given a whole book full of details about him, but we want something more than a mere catalogue.

In chapter 8, Selig tells us about his life with Toni, and the process by which the affair

ended. Selig introduces Toni in an odd way. He does not say such things as "she was" or "we did". He says, "Can I reconstruct Toni?" As if she were a machine. "She was 24 that year. A tall, coltish girl . . . slender . . . agile and awkward." The physical details give us something we can visualise, but nothing that would allow us to get to know her.

But in the middle of that kind of detail, we are told that Toni is "extraordinarily wise". This phrase brings our attention to a standstill. How can he say this, when he has given us nothing from which such "wisdom" might spring? In fact, we suspect that this quality of wisdom is, in Selig's eyes, exactly the same kind of quality as coltishness, agility, or awkwardness. This impression receives support from the description of Toni as "a witty, shrewd girl, not really well educated but extraordinarily wise." Selig is trying to persuade us to like Toni without having been introduced to her — but there's that other implication, that Selig is not really interested in any of these characteristics. And the suspicion grows that Selig is also just a bundle of qualities without any real person within which they might have some reality.

We never do quite "meet" Toni. We are told that she has "full, heavy breasts". This just tells us more about Selig's simple-minded way of looking at women: "I dig busty women." From then on, the narrative withdraws entirely from any further consideration of Toni as a person separate from Selig, the observer. "After I realised I loved her I took care never to spy on her head." Tony exists in only one real relationship: that between her and Selig's "gift". "I seemed to be turning her on," he congratulates himself. When he gets her to bed (very easily, like everything else he does), all he can do is whinge because "If what she felt for me wasn't love, it was good enough, the best I could hope for; and in the privacy of my own head I could feel love for her." Back to Square One: David Selig.

During the entire account of his life with Toni, Selig never strays from his self-protective obsession with his own position and reactions. This is a person who is supposed to have gift of telepathy. But we gain no sense of a person who can really perceive anything about any other person. In particular, his perceptions about the woman he "loves" are no more sophisticated than those of a columnist for a cheap magazine. Selig tells us one of the best times of his life, but the kernel of it is reduced to this:

We slept very little, our first two weeks. Not that we were screwing all the time, though there was a lot of that; but we talked. We were new to each other, which is the best time in any relationship, when there are whole pasts to share, when everything pours out and there's no need to search for things to say.

The tone and content of passages like this are tediously banal. It reads much like the coy account which an inarticulate bloke might tell his mate on the train in the morning. The account is full of hackneyed phrases like "the best time of our relationship", "whole pasts to share", and everything "pouring out", with that embarrassingly trite emphasis on "but we talked". What we find here, as in the rest of the book, is a slide across the surface of language which reveals nothing underneath, just as Selig perceives little of any permanent interest or value.

The one constant, commonplace note in this book is that of self-pity. Selig is losing his power of telepathy, and he spends much of the book speculating about the unbearable consequences of that loss. But would it be any real loss if Selig did lose his telepathic powers? Have they helped him to become a person who is in any way more remarkable than other people?

Several weeks after Toni has moved in with him, David Selig becomes more than usually involved with their love-making. "I could not resist watching her at the moment of climax," he remembers, "watching on all levels, and so I opened the barrier that I had so scrupulously erected and, just as she was coming, my mind touched a curious finger to her soul and received the full uprushing volcanic intensity of her pleasure." Here is the complete Selig experience of telepathy: an extension of his own capacities for physical pleasure. Throughout the book, he uses his "gift" deliberately to stimulate his own pleasures. He talks about "communication", yet never understands or partakes in any process of communication. Once we understand this, we hope that he will lose his power. Such a loss might enable him to break out of the unbreakable box of endless self-deception which surrounds all his actions and perceptions.

Dying Inside becomes so oppressive to read that the reader feels like a mouse trapped in a box with an enraged scorpion. There's nothing to do but sit still and endure the pain. We can get out of the box only if we stop reading the book.

But, as I've tried to show, Silverberg is adept at keeping his readers, even when they are not enjoying themselves very much. One of the implied "hooks" of the book, as I've hinted, is the promise of a guided tour, behind Selig's eyes, of the risqué underside of the "real" New York. This promise is broken. Certainly we are shown much interesting New York sociology — but, unfortunately, through only the eyes of David Selig. Selig has a bafflingly simple value system of observation: What are the mammary measurements of the women in any particular situation? Who's trying to get off with whom, how, and when? Where's my bit?

I'm rather fond of party scenes in novels (perhaps because I dislike parties so much), but in the party scene in *Dying Inside*, we see only the antics of the psychiatrist and the university professor (and the nubile young chick who picks up Selig as soon as he enters the room). The psychiatrist and the professor are each trying to gain the attentions of Selig's sister, Judith. The events become very predictable.

The puncture in *Dying Inside* is just that predictability. It is a book almost entirely without drama because, once Silverberg has outlined the main conflicts and participants in each scene, the following events proceed like clockwork to their particular futile endings. The participants are always predictable because they are always clichés. Even when Selig, in a self-conscious, condescending gesture, shows us the contents of his own room, he tells us no more than we can guess already about him. The objects — books, records, furniture, and other memorabilia — are undeviatingly typical of the kind of figure we know Selig to be. Paradoxically, they do not tell us any more about what kind of individual he is.

But still we are playing Silverberg's game; he can still claim that all this was in his intentions. Selig is contemptuous, so we can hardly complain if we feel contempt for him.

But we can complain, I think, if we are bored by the book, or feel that the book as a whole has revealed nothing, characterised nothing, and has shown no sign of interesting thought or wisdom. Silverberg has chosen the wrong form for his book. He thinks that Introspection equals Art, or that Pain equals Art, or that Confession equals Art. Selig cannot see outside his own narrow frame of reference, and Silverberg does not seem to be able to step outside his own book and judge whether it is effective in itself. A writer cannot simply create a schmuck, let him speak aloud, and call the result a piece of Art. Unpleasant documentary, perhaps. The author does have a res-

ponsibility to shape his creation, show him for what he is, and also show us what he might become. Even a novel composed of ugly components must turn out a work of beauty for us to gain anything from reading it.

But I'm not sure how Silverberg could perform such a miracle. The book seems so hopelessly ill-conceived as to be unredeemable. All we have on the page are the clichéd meanderings of a mean-spirited, nasty-minded person we can never quite believe in. If Silverberg wants us to care anything about his creation, he should have truly brought him to life first. For *Dying Inside*, as it stands, is indeed dead — quite empty inside.

Bruce Gillespie
July 1976

APPENDIX:

It is the Editor's (probably illegitimate) privilege to reply to the other writers in this magazine who have written on the same subject.

To Don D'Amassa:

Yours is about the best case anybody could put up for *Dying Inside*. I disagree with your conclusions, and am particularly reluctant to connect Selig with any sort of religious impulse (despite what Silverberg writes in the book). To me, it is precisely the religious sense which Selig lacks. And if Silverberg identifies with Selig . . . well, I've speculated about this in my reply to Terry Green. Any conscientious exploration of this theme could possibly be slanderous to Robert Silverberg the person.

To R Faraday Nelson (who objected to *Dying Inside* in an article in *Science Fiction Review* 17, but for what seem to me illegitimate reasons):

- (a) *Dying Inside* does not "show the world as it is". If it did, it would be a good novel. Instead, it is a solipsist novel, showing an enclosed world as tiny as Selig's hackneyed and self-absorbed introspections. Selig just never sees anything for its own sake. His motto seems to be, "Fuck it or fear it."
- (b) You cannot find a world much smaller than Selig's, which runs, as has been said of writers, the full gamut of experiences from A to B.
- (c) Selig is offered an extraordinarily large number of choices, each of which could be better chosen than the decision he does make. I see no evidence of the "man is puppet" theme. Selig is losing his power of telepathy. So? Many people lose limbs or other personal powers, and many of them rise above the situation. Why shouldn't Selig? The loss of his power, as I've said, promises to give Selig real self-respect and personal power for the first time in his life. (You write the sequel to *Dying Inside*, Ray. To judge from some of your previous stories, you might write exactly the novel I would like to read.)
- (d) I see little evidence from your article that you've read much modern fiction at all. I might be wrong on making such an assumption; if so, I apologise. You must be reading a different lot of recent books than those I buy. Think what Stanley Elkin could make of *Dying Inside*! It is science fiction, with its recurrent power fantasies and its blindness to most of the exciting possibilities in the world, rather than 'modern fiction' which is usually boring.
- (e) But you're right in saying that Selig is not willing to struggle. That's why I don't like *Dying Inside*. But to generalise from that to "modern fiction"? Isn't it more likely that, under heavy disguise, *Dying Inside* is just another bloody awful science fiction book?

Robert Silverberg AT HIS BEST

THE STOCHASTIC MAN



Bruce Gillespie

Bruce Gillespie reviews

The Stochastic Man,
by Robert Silverberg
(Harper and Row; 1975; 229 pages; \$7.95;
Gollancz; 229 pages; 3.75 Pounds)

The Stochastic Man is the best novel that Robert Silverberg has written, and it is one of the few enjoyable sf novels published during 1975.

But in *The Stochastic Man* we find the same uneasy and unsatisfactory elements that are flaws in Silverberg's other books — and, of course, there is the problem of accounting for Silverberg's ambitiousness. But back to these uneasinesses later.

The main difference which even the most casual reader will notice between *Dying Inside* and *The Stochastic Man* is that the story of the latter book carries along the reader in a compelling way. *The Stochastic Man* is, more than anything else, the most skilful "narrative of events" which Silverberg has written for quite some time.

The Stochastic Man is told in the first person by Lew Nichols, who is a stochasticist. The Presidential candidate, Paul Quinn, hires Nichols to use his professional skills of rigorous guesswork to make forecasts which will enable Quinn to gain the Presidency in either the year 2000 or in 2004. During the events of the novel, Quinn holds the post of Mayor of an energetically disintegrating New York City.

Nichols finds that the basis for his systematic skills is made meaningless when he meets Martin Carvajal, a man who can actually catch glimpses of his own future. Carvajal places so much faith in his visions from the future that he does not believe in free will. Because he "sees" Nichols becoming a part of his life, he makes contact with him. Carvajal sees Nichols with a shaved head at some time in the future, so he tells Nichols to shave his head. The idea of "causing" or "avoiding" events has disappeared from Carvajal's way of thinking — everything, including his own death, just keeps on occurring as he perceived beforehand.

Meanwhile, Nichols' ideas and pattern of life face other challenges, particularly from his wife Sundara. Sundara becomes involved with members of the ex-Californian Transit creed, which is centred mainly around the idea that all events in the world are arbitrary. As Sundara becomes increasingly involved with Transit and Lew more and more concerned to arrange for Quinn's electoral chances, the two split apart. As Nichols feels increasingly crushed by the pressure of events, he makes the mistake of revealing where he gains his "knowledge" of the future. Quinn is frightened by what he sees as a kind of witchery, and sacks Nichols. However, Nichols is beginning to gain the powers of "seeing" the future as the novel ends.

Carvajal can see the occasion of his own death — at a time before Quinn will be facing the electors. The resolution of these elements in the book projects Nichols into a future composed of a new set of challenges and possible disasters.

Such an inadequate summary of the super-ficial events of *The Stochastic Man* gives little idea of the skill with which Silverberg has compared, contrasted, blended, and dramatised the themes and events of the book.

Take the word "dramatisation". It was a quality conspicuous by its absence in *Dying Inside* (and in other, less successful, Silverberg books, such as *Son of Man*). Yet it is a quality which can be created in several simple, but effective ways.

Silverberg dramatises "the future" as an active idea in itself. Nichols believes strongly in using his stochastic projections about the future to sort out possibilities and manipulate ways in which the world might go. Sundara joins a creed which believes in allowing all possible futures to happen randomly. Carvajal knows that there is a fixed future, impossible to change. Nichols keeps doubting his proposition:

"Suppose I just leave right now, without doing what I'm supposed to have done."

"That won't be possible," said Carvajal evenly. "I remember the course this conversation must take, and you don't leave before asking your next question. There's only one way for things to happen. You have no choice but to say and do the things I saw you say and do . . . We're both actors in a script that can't be rewritten. Come, now. Let's play out our script . . ."

Yet the question of free will versus determinism has been argued about often enough. What Silverberg brings to life is not so much the theoretical paradox, but the character of Martin Carvajal himself.

Carvajal is the most interesting character in any of Silverberg's novels. He is interesting because he is the only one in that long line of block-busters to be believable as a real person. And that is despite the fact that his paranormal powers are more spectacular than those of, say, David Selig (*Dying Inside*) or Krug (*Tower of Glass*). He is real because we see him clearly:

He wore a white shirt with buttoned collar, a grey tweed jacket, a brown neck-tie. He looked like a schoolmaster waiting to hear me recite my Latin conjugations and declensions.

He is real because he emerges convincingly out of a particular social background:

"I've always lived here . . . This is the only house I've ever known . . . These furnishings belonged to my mother . . . Has deteriorated, yes . . . Everything is so familiar to me, Mr. Nichols — the names written in the wet cement when the pavement was new long ago, the great ailanthus tree in the schoolyard, the weather-beaten gargoyles over the doorway of the building across the street . . ."

He is real because, of all Silverberg's characters, he is the only one whose predicament is unromanticised. He is the only one of Silverberg's supermen who does, in fact, suffer from a real predicament: "My life is without surprises, Mr. Nichols, and it is without decisions, and it is without volition." He has seen many times the events leading up to his own death; fragments from the rest of his life crowd in upon him all the time: "I perceive what will happen; eventually it takes place; I am actor in a drama that allows for no improvisations, as are you, as are we all." He has no explanations for his powers, and there is much in his future life that he cannot see. But most of the events are, to him, "tautological". In particular, he sees Nichols taking a particular action, tells Nichols over the phone, and Nichols fulfils the prediction. Carvajal has no preferences; no sense of choosing:

"What does have meaning? What does meaning mean? We merely play out the script, Mr Nichols. Would you like another glass of water?"

Carvajal's power has destroyed his life even more effectively than Selig's did his, all the more



so for the courage and complete lack of self-pity in Carvajal's approach. Of all people in the world, he spends much of his adult life preparing himself for death, and without any trace of a philosophy, religion, or explanation to comfort him.

Lew Nichols, the narrator of the story, is much less interesting as a person. At best, he proves an effective spindle around which the events of the novel can move. Lew Nichols is a fool, a naive opportunist, and a coward — much like David Selig, in fact. The differences between Nichols and Selig (although both have the same irritating, Silverbergian tone of voice) is that (a) Silverberg does not appear to identify with Nichols, and that (b) Nichols actually *does* something.

The casual browser might stop reading *The Stochastic Man* after the first two or three pages. Gimcrack philosophising ("Push the baby and the baby falls down") is ungainly enough in any sort of book, let alone in science fiction. At first we think that it is Silverberg who is delivering the broadside. However, details of Lew Nichols' life and future career "leak" into the narrative. Soon it becomes clear that Nichols is trying to convince himself, rather than us, of some false notions. The ideas of the book do spring out of the character, so we have some basis for judging the character quite separately from the literary strengths or faults of the author.

Lew Nichols is every bit as repellant as David Selig. He is, for instance, even more snobbish than Selig and much more addicted to physical comfort. He remains delighted by the idea of helping Quinn to become President, very much because he is entranced by the atmosphere of riches and power which surrounds Quinn's various aides. Nichols notices details such as the fact that one of Quinn's advisers has an office "like the imperial chapel of a Byzantine cathedral". People whom Nichols admires are always described as "great full-backs of men"; or, they "radiate power". Events in the book tend to happen in places like the Harbour Hilton, that "great pyramid all agleam on its pliable pontoon platform half a kilometre off Manhattan's tip". Nichols likes to be seen in the company of "the cream of the eastern liberal establishment", but he tends to think of most other New Yorkers as an "ethnic and geographic mix". He thinks of himself and his wife in tv-commercial terms, as the "tall, fair-haired man and slender dark woman". One cannot help but notice the quivering delight in passages like this:

The terrors and traumas of New York City seemed indecently remote as we stood by our long crystalline window . . . Actually neither of us found life in the city really burdensome. As members of the affluent minority we were insulated from much of the crazy stuff, sheltered at home in our max-security hilltop condo, protected by screen and filter mazes when we took the commuter pods across into Manhattan, guarded in our offices by more of the same.

Nichols, like too many of Silverberg's characters, does not find "life . . . really burdensome". This has its inevitable deleterious effect — Nichols will not face the consequences of his own ideas and actions. On the one hand, he will admit that Carvajal's vision of the future is merely an extension of his own desires to know the future through mathematical methods. However, he is horrified continually by Carvajal's determinism, by Carvajal's inability to make any decisions about his own life. But Nichols keeps trying to manipulate events, basing his actions on knowledge which Carvajal gives him. Nichols claims to be able to make complex stochastic predictions for events in the city of New York, but he makes the most naive statements about the people he meets. Nichols talks much about being attracted to the "conduits of power", yet he is surprised when Quinn shows no gratitude for his services, and sacks him when he becomes inconvenient.

Lew Nichols seems to come from that long line of American characters seemingly designed to prove that there is no one more potentially evil than the entirely innocent, nobody more destructive than the person who believes that the best of all possible worlds is just around the corner.

The fact that Lew Nichols is the viewpoint character in this book makes it unlikely that it will be enjoyable. Why, then, is *The Stochastic Man* an attractive book? After all, most of Silverberg's novels have failed to recover from being crushed under the weight of a despicable "hero".

There's one simple technical reason why *The Stochastic Man* reads better than most of Silverberg's other books. He does not Tell All at the start, as happens in so many of his novels and short stories. Like a good cook, Silverberg keeps adding surprising ingredients to the mixture to keep us from becoming bored by the taste. For instance, he is sensible enough

to leave Sundara out of the book until it is nearly a quarter through. When she appears, the relationship between Lew and Sundara Nichols is a welcome contrast to the political shenanigans which occupy the first few chapters of the book. Later in the book, we discover the implications of Carvajal's powers through bits of message which appear during one meeting after another. In this way, the texture of the book continues to thicken until the last page.

But the real reason for the success of *The Stochastic Man* is that the emotional power does not derive from the human characters at all. The book is most strikingly a memorial to New York City — a memorial by, in dramatic terms, a character who is so obsessed by the horror of the city that surrounds him that he is fascinated by it; a memorial by, in authorial terms, a writer who left New York to live in California, but whose imagination is still fired by memories of his previous home.

In *The Stochastic Man*, the image of New York alternates between horror and celebration. The first few pages of the book contain the ethereal image of "the indistinct towers of the New York of twenty years hence, glittering in the pale light of mornings not yet born". At the same time, Lew and Sundara Nichols keep themselves apart from the city. To Nichols, New York comprises "bands of marauding seven-year olds . . . braving the fierce snow to harass weary homegoing widows on Flatbush Avenue . . . and rival gangs of barely pubescent prostitutes, bare-thighed in gaudy thermal undershirts and aluminium coronets". But the rich have never lived better in New York than they do in Silverberg's 1999: all the main characters except Carvajal enjoy the most extraordinary luxury.

Some of Silverberg's images of New York are clear, like those quoted above. Others are presented in a vacuous, generalised way, so that fine details lose meaning when related within the empty rhetoric of a social catalogue. Silverberg's horrified fascination with the city comes into focus only within the two most dramatically effective scenes in the book. For instance, Lew Nichols ventures into darkest Brooklyn in order to meet Martin Carvajal:

But in time I came, undented if not undaunted to Carvajal's street. Filth I had expected, yet, and rotting mounds of garbage in the street, and the rubble-strewn sites of demolished buildings looking like the gaps left by knocked-out teeth; but not

the dry blackened corpses of beasts in the streets — dogs, goats, pigs? — and not the woody-stemmed weeds cracking through the pavement as if this were some ghost town . . . This might have been an outpost in the Mexican desert a century ago.

Prose such as this has the same kind of texture as Hugo's looming images of Notre Dame de Paris, or Charles Dickens' London streets — simplified, garish images, it's true, but powerful, unforgettable images, nonetheless. The scene is particularly effective because, to give it point, Silverberg evokes a landscape seemingly the antithesis of our conventional idea of cities: the landscape of "an outpost in the Mexican desert a century ago". Newspapers already talk about large cities as jungles — Silverberg shows how they might devolve into deserts.

But jungles and deserts are living landscapes. Carvajal's environment, in which only he feels safe, bristles with its own fierce, primitive life. It has seven-year-old murderers and "muggers of muggers", but they are still people who have avoided the sterilised, animated death so often imagined in science fiction magazines. In this book, Silverberg creates a sense of potential life, life hidden away from the gleaming towers of the rich, life waiting to be reborn:

There was a foul storm two days before Christmas . . . fierce brutal winds and sub-Arctic temperatures and a heavy fall of dry, hard, tough snow . . . I went to bed early and woke up early into a dazzling sunny morning . . . there was something odd about the quality of the light, which was not the harsh brittle lemon hue of a winter day but rather the sweet mellow gold of spring . . . the temperature had risen to improbable late April warmth.

The day is 31 December 1999. It has been the coldest December in New York for many years, and many people expect not to be able to leave their houses in order to see in the new millennium. But temperatures rise, the snow begins to melt, and New York comes to life.

I suspect that chapter 38 of *The Stochastic Man* is the best chapter that Silverberg has ever written. It seems to arise out of much stronger and deeper emotional streams that run in his other books. It carries along all the feelings of an entire book and channels them into a rushing prose passage which, for once, washes away the usual Silverberg silt of cheap sentiment and false philosophising.

The last day of the old millennium occurs when Lew Nichols seems to have lost all point to his own life. Quinn, his hero, has sacked him. He has been divorced from Sundara for some months. He does not want to see Carvajal. He is now living in an unfamiliar apartment in an otherwise familiar part of New York. Because of the snow, he has been hardly able to leave his apartment for nearly a month.

And then the rebirth — but not just for him. For just one grand moment in its latter history, the whole of New York bursts into its own rough life:

Ordinarily one didn't stroll like this in Manhattan after dark. But tonight the streets were as busy as they were by day, pedestrians everywhere, laughing, peering into shop windows, waving to strangers, jostling one another playfully, and I felt safe. Was this truly New York, the city of closed faces and wary eyes, the city of knives that gleamed in dark sullen streets? Yes, yes, yes, New York, but a New York transformed, a millennial New York, New York on the night of the climactic Saturnalia.

The night becomes more giddy. The crowds are joined by hundreds of thousands more. The New Year is welcomed in at Times Square for the first time in many years. Houses burn and

people die — but that's not what we see in the book. A violent kind of communal feeling springs up from reservoirs whose existence had been forgotten. Policemen lead much of the revelry; fornication takes place in the streets; Lew Nichols feels transformed by the whole experience.

The whole scene is unusual in Silverberg's fiction because it offers no reassurances. Throughout the novel, Paul Quinn has been identified with both the city of New York and the theme of the end of the millennium (with the consistent, joking proviso that, as Lew Nichols realises, the end of the millennium does not actually arrive until 31 December 2000). Yet when the long night's celebration is finished, Quinn is the first person to try to restore the status quo. The police chief is ashamed that his officers have taken part in the rioting, so he resigns; Quinn accepts the resignation, and begins "cleaning up"; the sense of communality recedes back into the violent streets. The reader sees what Quinn is really like, even if Nichols does not.

Nichols is ashamed of his own part in the frivolity yet, from our point of view, it is his one really human action in the book. "I lived entirely in the present, like an animal, with no notion of what might happen next . . ." Surely this just means that he enjoyed himself properly for once! And then there were the visions. Silverberg won't let himself write a perfect chapter. He is not content to let Lew Nichols enjoy himself (and the reader with him). He is not content to reveal a panorama of life seeking to find light and warmth even on concrete paths. Silverberg must throw in something melodramatic and grotesque. He shows what happens when Nichols begins suddenly to "see" his own future images:

A baffling torrent of images roared through my mind. I saw myself old and frayed, coughing in a hospital bed with a shining spidery lattice of medical machinery all about me; I saw myself swimming in a clear mountain pool; I saw myself battered and heaved by surf on some angry tropical shore . . . colour assailed me. Voices whispered to me, speaking in fragments, in pulverised bits of words and tag ends of phrases . . . This is seeing, this is how it begins, like a fever, like a madness.

But, of course, it is not seeing — at least, not for the reader. This passage annoyed me greatly. Why, I thought to myself, must Silverberg ruin even the best things in his books? Why does he, time and again, bring to life a fruitful image, only to bludgeon it into a mere scrap of dead prose?

In other words, why can't Silverberg ever write a consistently good book?

Take, for instance, of the most vivid and important scenes in the novel, the dinner where Paul Quinn makes the speech which begins to propel him toward the Presidency, and where Sundara meets the two members of Transit who will convert her to their creed. In this scene, Silverberg shows that he has a considerable sense of the illusions which form the fabric of much of American politics. (We can only note, with perhaps some dismay, the similarities between the political styles of 2000's Quinn and 1976's Jimmy Carter.) Silverberg shows clearly how political speeches can say nothing, but convey everything to the audience. Each person listening finds some piece of him- or herself in the telling. " . . . The time has come to build the ultimate society," intones Quinn and Nichols thinks to himself, "I heard the click and the whirr . . . and I didn't need great stochastic gifts to guess that we would all hear much, much more about the Ultimate Society before Paul Quinn was done with us." And there's the point made; the emotions of the party workers and voters have been triggered; this is the decisive political event in Quinn's career.

Yet how does Nichols react? Appropriately, I think . . . until one part of his account which destroys the whole effect for me. About Quinn: "Now, glittering in the spotlights, he seemed a vehicle for cosmic energies; there played through him and out from him an irresistible power that shook me profoundly."

There's that false phrase: "vehicle for cosmic energies". What does it mean? Why is it there? Surely it is there merely for melodramatic effect, a badly miscalculated effect.

This might seem like a quibble, until we find examples of this kind of over-writing on every page of the book. The reader has seen that the listeners to Quinn have handed over their wills to him already. By overstating Nichols' reaction, Silverberg implies that he has misunderstood the meaning of the scene as well, and thinks that Quinn has some independent, super power over people.

For eventually we must place the blame for bad prose on the author rather than on his main character, just as we had to do for *Dying Inside*. In *The Stochastic Man*, there are the bizarre sex scenes in which the prose converts the main characters into mindless fucking machines (with images such as "Damascene steel", "the most polymerised of plastics", "easy confident strokes", "jewelled ratchets" — all applied to loving motions of the body). Perhaps this is part of the Nichols character, but the same kind of insensitivity can be found in the viewpoint characters of nearly all Silverberg's books.

Always we come back to the same problem: the opinion that Silverberg has of his own work. He wants it to be taken so seriously, yet his language is never exact enough or sufficiently concentrated to be considered as "art". (Well, perhaps I will concede one exception, that delicate but powerful short story, "Sundance", which is certainly Silverberg's finest achievement so far.) As an American writer (so said John Updike during a recent radio interview) "you're either a priest or a hack". Silverberg seems to have decided that he wanted no one to call him a hack again, so he has tried elevating himself into a priest (or "Artist"). He fails to see the wide and interesting field between these two extremes.

Why, for instance, cannot Silverberg be content to be known as a fine performer? Science fiction writers are, even at the best, performers rather than artists. After all, Silverberg's efforts seem directed outwards, rather than inwards. *The Stochastic Man* is a marvellous performance; a continuously gaudy and spectacular melodrama; as arresting a piece of science fiction as has been produced anywhere in the field during recent years. Like George Turner, I think that Silverberg can and should write better — but not if he continues the direction taken by *The Stochastic Man*. There's only so far he can go in that direction. If Silverberg wants to write something much better, he will need to retrace his steps, go back to the beginning, and take some quite different path. He will need to re-examine his most basic assumptions and methods. If he does this, the results could be spectacular. If he continues to write books like *The Stochastic Man*, the results could still be spectacular, but only in the same way. *The Stochastic Man* is, I suspect, at the end of one road in Silverberg's career and in science fiction itself.

The interesting question is: will Silverberg keep travelling along the same road, to arrive ultimately at creative sterility, or have the courage to find that other, secret path which he has been seeking for so long?

The interesting question is: will Silverberg keep travelling along the same road, to arrive ultimately at creative sterility, or have the courage to find that other, secret path which he has been seeking for so long?

Bruce Gillespie
July 1976

Robert Silverberg

SHORT STORIES

Spectrum of Silverberg Barry Gillam

Barry Gillam reviews
The Cube Root of Uncertainty
by Robert Silverberg
(Macmillan; 1970; 239 pages; \$5.95).
This review appeared first in *S F Commentary*
20, April 1971, pp 13-15).

To a large extent, *The Cube Root of Uncertainty* is interesting because it provides a spectrum of Silverberg's writing. His introduction notes that the stories were written between 1954 and 1968. Five of the selections here appeared in his earlier collections, one in *Dimension Thirteen* and the rest in *A Needle in a Timestack*. Therefore one assumes that they were chosen to show some self-statement about Silverberg's career. (Although this is ostensibly a theme collection of pessimistic stories, it includes a story as exuberant as "Double Dare".)

The twelve selections ("10 superb science fiction tales" reads the dust jacket) include Silverberg's best, "Passengers", and also his recent, excellent "Sundance". But it might be better to approach these chronologically, examining the earlier stories first.

"Double Dare" and "Absolutely Inflexible" both appeared in 1956. "Double Dare", which I read with pleasure in some now forgotten anthology, tells of a bet between two Earth engineers and two extraterrestrials of the same profession. As a result of the teams are on their opponent's planets, prepared to demonstrate their superiority in a test of wits. Each must reproduce any three products put before them. The Earthmen are first given a depilator and a mouse trap, both easily completed. But then they are confronted by a perpetual motion machine. . . . The story has a 'fifties wit reminiscent of de Camp's nuts and bolts stories.

"Absolutely Inflexible" is an ordinary time-paradox story whose twist can be seen coming a mile away. I can understand how the deterministic nature of time tales, with their inflexible fate, appeals to writers, but the story fitted *A Needle in a Timestack* much better.

From 1958-1959 comes "The Iron Chancellor", "Mugwump Four", and "Translation Error".

The heroes of "The Iron Chancellor" are the Carmichaels, a "pretty plump family". When they purchase a robocook that will diet them automatically, they reckon without "inflexible" robotic logic. The malicious nature of the story is particularly delightful.

The beginning of "Mugwump Four" is a funny spoof on spy stories but soon it degenerates into farce and from there into a time-twisting ending.

"Translation Error" deals with parallel universes, a galactic bureaucracy, and the tenaciousness of Earthmen, and reminds one of Clarke's "Rescue Party".

"The Shadows of His Wings", "Neighbour", and "The Sixth Palace" were published in 1963, 1964, and 1965 respectively.

The first is a funny, de Campish story of a professor, the only expert on some supposedly dead alien languages. But one of the aliens arrives very much alive and the professor must deal with him at close quarters.

With "Neighbour", the tale of a long-standing, grim feud, one notices a kind of studied, conscious pessimism creeping into the stories. The tendency looks forward to "Flies" and *Thorns* (both 1967).

"The Sixth Palace" is a fool-the-robot-that-guards-the-treasure story, and an ordinary tale but for its calculating compulsions: the man's greed and wits vs the robot's "inflexible" program and undeniable deadliness.

In "Halfway House" (1966), a man must pay for his cancer cure by serving as the final arbiter for others applying for such services. Here Silverberg deals with a force that appears again and again in his work: the companion to dark visions — guilt. This is a turning point: the exterior, superficial dangers yield to the more terrible traps of one's own mind. Interestingly enough, just after the third-person treatment of drama is dropped, Silverberg discards his use of third-person narrative. "To the Dark Star" (1968) is told in the first person and it details a crime, the guilt for which will never leave its perpetrator. The story's location is the confined space and confined world of a spaceship on a reconnaissance mission to a distant world. A fine story.

"Passengers" (1968) is Silverberg's best story to date. Here he uses the very necessary first-person form and, to make the story more immediate, the present tense. "Passengers" envisions a world of the very near future invaded by intangible, unknown alien beings. These Passengers take over minds, seemingly at random, and bedevil the bodies. While anybody may stop what they are doing and suddenly walk away under the control of a Passenger, the world is nervously falling apart. Drivers, taken over, cause accidents. Nothing, *no one*, is dependable any longer. People keep to themselves, stay in their shells more. The ridden do not remember their periods under the leash and anything they may happen to remember is taboo. Thus the hero, and all the people in the world of the story, have a load of guilt and shame for something over which they have no control, for another person's actions.

There are two cross references for this story: Fred Brown's "The Waveries" and Fritz Leiber's "Coming Attraction". "The Waveries" is an analogous idea, the 1945 vintage. "Coming Attraction" is an analogous mode and mood. The social canker of Leiber's 1950 masterpiece becomes the personal terror of Silverberg's 1968 story.

The one remaining story is "Sundance" (1969), and it goes beyond "Passengers" in its use of the medium. The story is divided into twelve sections, which are told in various voices, all in the present tense. It tells of Tom

Two Ribbons, on an expedition to an alien planet. The major life form, dubbed "Eaters", is presumed to have no intelligence, but Tom discerns signs of it in certain rituals he sees performed by the creatures. Now, as this story takes place in the mind of Tom Two Ribbons, one must work as one does in *Pale Fire* to decide what is the objective truth. One accepts speech and actions reported, but interpretations are suspect. Is the expedition exterminating intelligent beings? Or is this merely a kind of therapy, to work another perception of guilt into a man whose people were exterminated, like the buffalo they lived on? Are the Eaters really unintelligent? The use of the third and second person depicts the full range of a mind that is under the torment of guilt and uncertainty. Different voices parallel the fall through several levels of perception. "Sundance" may be considered a quite successful experiment.

I cannot vouch for the intention of the connection, but I do not think it accidental that "Passengers" and "Sundance" bear the same thematic relationship to *To Live Again* and *Downward to the Earth* as "Flies" does to *Thorns*. Each pair, a short story and a novel, deals in depth with one problem. In "Passengers" and *To Live Again* it is a strange, dangerous confluence of minds; in "Sundance" and *Downward to the Earth* it is an ecstatic confluence of spirit. Indeed, the emotional and social world of Silverberg's fiction is defined by these two poles. The invasion of a mind by another is perhaps the most graphic demonstration of how separate, individual, and alone each human being is. The communal ecstasy one finds in "Sundance" when Tom dances with the Eaters and in *Downward to the Earth* when Gunderson is reborn, harks back to the theories of race consciousness. And it depends on a loosening of the mind's control over the physical body. That "Passengers" and *To Live Again* are the better works is not surprising. For one thing they are simply informed with better writing, characters, and invention. But there are other factors. These stories focus on their characters, and, especially in s.f., a well-constructed character can save a story. Also, it is very difficult to communicate the kind of ecstasy revealed in the other pair. Loneliness everybody knows. But an absolute joy of spirit and body? How can one verbalise something for which there are no words? (Milton's specific Hell is much more vivid than his ineffable Heaven.) Actually, Silverberg acquires himself rather well, but the nebulous place where souls meet in *Downward to the Earth* must be looked at with scepticism.

The Cube Root of Uncertainty is not a bad collection. It has two outstanding stories and a few other quite enjoyable ones. It has a number of just mediocre stories. What it really demonstrates is Silverberg's growth over the years. After he put aside the 'fifties stories (sometime in 1966) he entered his golden era, and I expect the next retrospective, a few years from now, to merit a more favourable report.

Silverberg becoming a better writer

Derrick Ashby

Derrick Ashby reviews
Sundance and Other Stories
(Nelson; 1974; 192 pages; \$6.50)
Unfamiliar Territory
(Gollancz; 1975; 212 pages; 2.50 Pounds;
original US publication 1973).

Robert Silverberg is one of the most interesting of the science fiction writers of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These two collections, *Sundance* and *Unfamiliar Territory*, give us twenty-one stories (with one represented twice) dating from 1957 to 1973. *Sundance* includes stories from the whole span; the stories in *Unfamiliar Territory* date from 1971 to 1973.

Silverberg's first notable stories appeared for the first time at the tag end of the Golden Age. At that time he was an undisguised hack writer, though he did write good stories occasionally. During the early 'sixties, he received a Hugo as the Most Promising New Writer.

Four stories in *Sundance* appeared before 1960. They are "Neutral Planet" (1957), "The Overlord's Thumb" (1957), "Passport to Sirius" (1958), and "The Outbreeders" (1959). Of these, only "The Overlord's Thumb" appears to be worth reprinting.

"Neutral Planet" is a rather weak sociological problem story. Intersettler explorers from rival trading powers claim a planet of primitives as part of their sphere. The Earthmen outwit both their rivals and the inhabitants.

"Passport to Sirius" is a poor imitation of Pohl-Kornbluth satire.

"The Outbreeders" is an Adam-and-Eve story, which is obviously meant to be funny, but isn't.

"The Overlord's Thumb" has no original ideas, but it is a good story. Silverberg successfully transplants an old sociological problem into an sf setting: a dominant colonial power and a smaller power each have their own laws. If one of the colonials transgresses one of the host power's laws, which tries him?

Around the mid-'sixties, so says Silverberg, Silverberg discovered that he could sell stories written the way *he* wanted to write them — a previously unknown phenomenon. He had been a hack writer because the magazines would not buy anything else.

"The Pain Peddlers" (1963) marks the new Silverberg in one way. It is pessimistic. It deals with future social wrongs while not attempting to resolve them. The new Silverberg is cynical, a black comedian.

"Neighbour" (1964) is much the same pattern, reminding me of David Bunch's *Moderan* in theme and content.

"Sundance" (1960) shows the new Silverberg maturing (by which I mean that he is settling down). "Sundance" is written in a mixture of first-and third-person and it is the first story, chronologically, which has no real conclusion. At its end nothing is resolved — indeed, it is at the end of the story, rather than at the beginning, that Silverberg poses the story's problem.

"Something Wild is Loose" (1971) is the longest story in the two collections, at 42 pages. It is also the best story; it is a story first, and science fiction second. It is a serious human-interest story.

Overall, the new Silverberg is a better writer than the old Silverberg. He uses language better and he shows a more vivid imagination. At the same time, he is no more consistent than his predecessor. In both manifestations, he can write very well and he can write very badly. His best feature is the way he can see old ideas in new settings.

From *Unfamiliar Territory*, "Good News From the Vatican" (1971) deals with the election of a robot Pope. It is an absurd idea and Silverberg knows it. Its absurdity is a comment by Silverberg on his fellow man, and is well taken. I didn't like the story. Silverberg's use of the first-and third-person present gives a flip-pant style which I find boring and unpleasant, however appropriate it might be to the subject matter of the story.

"In Entropy's Jaws" (1971) is a time-paradox story, and a fairly conventional one. The protagonist is assisted in a difficult situation by a man who turns out to be himself from the future. The narration includes a "present" time-line, plus flash-backs and "flash-forwards".

"Caliban" (1971) shows another facet of the new Silverberg — his use of irony, and his penchant for titles which are both pretentious and inappropriate.

"Now +n, now -n" (1972) shows how Silverberg can ruin a good story through carelessness. Again, he writes it in first-person present and past. Again, he presents a time paradox. A man has discovered a wild talent in himself. He exists as three individuals: his present self, his self twenty-four hours in the past, and his self twenty-four hours in the future. He uses this to invest in the stock exchange, and becomes very wealthy. He meets a

girl who also has a wild talent — she can oscillate in time. She has a device for suppressing psionic energy to control this talent. They fall in love, but the device suppresses *his* talent. Neither knows of the other's talent, but he deduces the existence of the suppressor. Of course there is a simple solution to his problem: he simply arranges certain times of the day when his three selves can communicate. However, the relationship between the two lovers is so passionate that they cannot keep away from each other. The situation becomes so recomplicated that Silverberg is reduced to an almost ridiculous conclusion.

"Push No More" (1972) is a good story — the best in the collection — about poltergeists, which an interesting idea about their origin.

"When We Went to See the End of the World" (1972) is similar to "Good News From the Vatican". It is a cynical, flippant story about the follies of man.

"What We Learned From This Morning's Newspaper" (1972) has been done before and is no better than the title.

"Caught in the Organ Draft" (1972) appears also in *Sundance*. It is a story of social criticism, making telling comparisons between military conscription and the "organ draft", the use of young men as organ banks for senior citizens.

"Some Notes on the Predynastic Epoch" (1973) sounds like Barry N. Malzberg to me and reads no better.

"Many Mansions" (1973) is yet another time-paradox story. Not bad, but not original.

"The Wind and the Rain" (1973) supports the environmentalist position, and is worth reading for a few telling passages.

"In the Group" (1973) was written for *Eros in Orbit*, and deals with the human problems resulting from group marriage. However, it is not particularly effective since Silverberg does not make sufficient comparisons between the group marriage in the story and marriage as it is today.

"The Mutant Season" has no credits, so perhaps it is original with the collection. It is the shortest of the twenty-one stories and I liked it. Silverberg, for once, makes effective use of his habit of shifting the first-person narrative from one viewpoint character to another.

I would buy *Sundance and Other Stories* for "Something Wild is Loose" alone — but not in hardback, thank you very much. But buy *Strange Bedfellows* (edited by Thomas Scortial) for "Push No More". Silverberg does not make good reading in collection.

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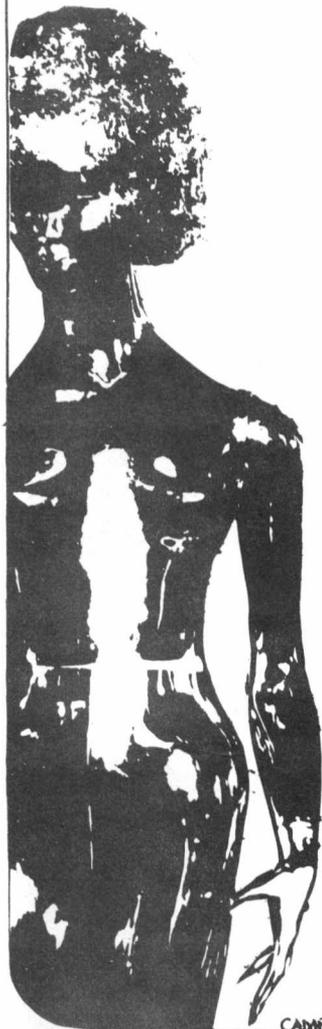
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