

SF COMMENTARY 76

30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION October 2000

THE UNRELENTING GAZE

GEORGE TURNER'S NON-FICTION: A SELECTION



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THE UNRELENTING GAZE: GEORGE TURNER'S NON-FICTION: A SELECTION

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INTRODUCTION I

George Turner: The Unrelenting Gaze

by Bruce Gillespie

George Turner did not quite claim to have an 'unrelenting gaze'. He wrote, during the 1977 Monash Writers' Workshop, when he was a Writer in Residence, that in dealing with apprentice authors he put on his "unrelenting" look — which children and small puppies tend to see through at once'. 'Unrelenting gaze' sounds much better for summing up George's work.

Many people did not see through the unrelenting gaze. Some hated George Turner forever because of his judgments on their work. Others, usually his women friends, saw past the steely Turner gaze immediately. Many of us, me included, were intimidated by George Turner the person, but savoured the joys of watching George Turner the critic get stuck into works that everybody else had always praised. Nobody could be complacent around George Turner. Sooner or later you had to look him in the eye . . . and blink.

My favourite George Turner was the person with whom I exchanged letters for nearly thirty years (the Haydn listener as well as the Le Guin reader), the already famous writer who sent a sheaf of reviews to *SF Commentary* before the first issue had appeared, the hard-working reviewer who contributed more to this magazine than anybody else, the voracious reader who after reading all the latest novels sent them to me and other people because he had no room to store them in his flat, the impressive speaker at science fiction conventions, the enthusiastic teacher and encourager of new writers at writers' workshops, and the author of a number of my favourite SF novels and articles. He was a person who always helped other people, often seeing talents in them they did not see in themselves.

Despite all that, nothing could have prepared me for the surprise of finding, when George died in June 1997, that he had made me his Literary Executor. (No explanation from George; just a provision in his will!) He had kept all his literary papers and notes scrupulously since 1970, so he made it very easy for me to extract all my favourite pieces of non-fiction in order to prepare this issue of *SF Commentary*. I did not expect the job to take three years (see page 75).

In her biography *George Turner: A Life* (Melbourne University Press, 1999), Judith Raphael Buckrich concentrates on George Turner's fiction as the main guide to his inner life and literary aspirations. Thanks to Judy for her great help in preparing this volume, which I've published in the belief that George tells us at least as much about himself in his non-fiction as he does in his fiction.

I wish I had time, room and money to publish a great deal more than these 120,000 words. I had hoped to republish the contents of *Off Cuts*, George's autobiographical chapbook, but I have been unable to contact its most recent publisher. I haven't reprinted any of his more than fifteen years of *Age* reviews. George kept copies of them all — but undated. I'm grateful to Yvonne Rousseau for taking the trouble to gather into one folder her collected correspondence with and articles about George Turner — but I would need another giant issue to reprint her treasure trove. I'll probably do it, but not this year.

Thank you to the following people for their help in preparing this book: Elaine Cochrane, David Lake and the Aussiecon 3 Committee, for financial help; the contributors of graphics, cartoons and photographs, especially Dick Jenssen, Chris Johnston, Elaine Cochrane and George himself; and people such as Judy Buckrich, Dick Jenssen, Jim and Andy Dunwoodie, John Foyster, Yvonne Rousseau, John Bangsund, Sally Yeoland, Peter Nicholls, Jenny Blackford and Russell Blackford (whose special issue of *Foundation* magazine includes my own article about George's non-fiction), and many others who have encouraged this project since 1997. Thanks also to the following editors who first published articles reprinted here: John Bangsund, Mervyn Binns, Jeremy Byrne, John Foyster, Stephen Murray-Smith, David Pringle, Kirpal Singh, Jonathan Strahan and Michael Tolley.

This collection is dedicated to John Bangsund, without whom none of us would have met George Turner.

— Bruce Gillespie, 24 September 2000

George Turner, critic and novelist

by John Foyster

George Turner began his career as a 'practising critic' with an article in the First Anniversary Issue of *Australian Science Fiction Review*, June 1967. For this edition, John Bangsund had persuaded many of his regular contributors to provide pieces of fiction, with the result that *ASFR* 10 is not at all typical of what the magazine had previously been. George Turner's contribution is the only long piece of criticism in this issue. In time, John Bangsund did exert his persuasive powers upon George Turner also, with greater success.

George Turner's concerns in this first article, 'The Double Standard', have remained with him; in 1984, some seventeen years later, he felt a strong urge to lead a Nova Mob meeting on the subject of the nature of the criticism of science fiction. In 1967, he was concerned to distinguish reviewing from criticism: he draws the line, as the subtitle of his article reveals, between 'the short look and the long, hard look'.

This article had its origins, according to Turner, in exchanges of ideas with John Bangsund. In introducing himself to his readers George Turner uses the same stylistic touches he is to retain throughout his SF writing career; he writes as he speaks, colloquially if this is appropriate, and without pretension or strain. Here, as elsewhere, his style assists the reader to follow comfortably (and at times it may appear all too comfortably) his flow of ideas.

In this and several other early pieces George Turner reveals much of his philosophy of science fiction, and this article will therefore, in dealing with his non-fiction, refer only to the article already cited, together with 'Nothing to Lose but the Chains' (*ASFR* 12, October 1967), 'On Writing About Science Fiction' (*ASFR* 18, December 1968, and his review of Armytage's *Yesterday's Tomorrows* in that issue) and 'Up the Pohl' (*ASFR* 19, March 1969).

Later in his career, George became a regular reviewer of science fiction (and later again, by preference, mainstream literature) for the *Melbourne Age*. Here he was able to function along the lines described in this earliest piece: he could 'give the reader of this periodical a guide to what is on the market'. But such a reviewer, he wrote in 1967, 'is of no use at all to the writer or to the serious reader who considers literature a major amenity of civilisation, one which must be treated with exactness and great care' (*ASFR* 10, p. 10).

In 'The Double Standard' George Turner aimed to go beyond this; he 'proposed to take a popular and much-lauded SF novel and treat it on several levels of criticism'; he was to be 'concerned with causes, effects

and ultimate values'.

The work to be dealt with was Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* (though Turner argues that more or less the same remarks could be made about *The Stars My Destination*), and ranged against this work was to be George Turner — an SF reader for 39 years, a student of literature for 30 and a practising novelist for ten years (not science fiction).

George Turner's mainstream novels are *Young Man of Talent* (1959), *A Stranger and Afraid* (1961), *The Cupboard Under the Stairs* (1962), *A Waste of Shame* (1965), *The Lame Dog Man* (1967) and *Transit of Cassidy* (1978). He received the Miles Franklin Award for *The Cupboard Under the Stairs*, and his own feelings about his novels are summarised in these remarks (*Contemporary Novelists*, 1976):

I am sufficiently old fashioned to prefer a story with a beginning, a development and a resolution (though not to the point of tying up every loose end in sight) but sufficiently of my time to avoid moral and ethical attitudes. Those of my characters who display them are apt to come to grief as the theme tests and retests them.

For this reason, I have been termed 'existentialist', which is probably true, and I have also been said to have no moral or ethical views at all, which is not. I merely condemn rigidity of attitude and I suppose that in the final summation, that is what my novels so far have been about.

George introduces his remarks about *The Demolished Man* with a series of quotations, mostly invented, but attributed to various generally anonymous labourers in the field of science fiction, one of whom is Sam Moskowitz. The imagined review by Moskowitz is printed as:

This magnificent novel sets a new literary standard in SF. Bester fulfils the promise shown in his trail-blazing short stories and crowns his career with a coruscating cascade of sheer genius. This novel marks a new development in SF.

Turner claims not to know whether Moskowitz ever did review *The Demolished Man*. Moskowitz's actual review (*Science Fiction Plus*, August 1953) can be used to show how sound George's ear is:

This novel represents the ultimate achieved to date in that particular direction of science-fiction

(archness of writing and loss of central ideas and plotting). Alfred Bester, an experienced radio script writer, pulls off every gimmick in a writer's retinue and even invents a few never seen before. He goes a step further and employs trick typesetting for special effects. The result is a completely different and effective science fiction novel. In its direction, it is good enough to discourage wise writers from exploring this vein any further. It is unlikely that they will be able to do better than Bester, and when an entire story must stand or fall by its writing, only the best is acceptable.

Although the plot when recited sounds asinine, and the pace and special effects slacken somewhat at about the halfway mark, this book is nevertheless an important experiment in the evolution of science fiction writing.

Near enough.

But the way into George's article is not through Moskowitz, but along the Via Norstrilia (as it was later to become) — a review by Rob Gerrand. George asserts that Gerrand invents virtues in *The Demolished Man* and turns to take his 'long, hard look'.

This is based, apparently, upon several readings of *The Demolished Man*: no one will be able to doubt that George Turner took the book seriously. During the course of these readings, Turner finds his feelings about the book evolving — something not entirely surprising. A book which at first was hard to put down becomes first a snow job and then, ten years later, hard going. Is this a change in the reader, one must wonder? Then Turner moves to his criticism, a long hard look that is to be framed by several questions: Does *The Demolished Man* deserve a high place? Is it good SF? Is it a good thriller? What does *The Demolished Man* tell us about a telepathic society? Is it a high point in SF or a high point in fooling the reader?

Turner acknowledges that it is an ingenious thriller — perhaps too much so. This can be used as an explanation of his initial reaction to *The Demolished Man*. But is it good SF? Here Turner begins to use his notions of what constitutes good SF: he begins to worry about ultimate values.

For George, a work must be consistent within its own guidelines; speculative ideas in an SF novel must be able to withstand scrutiny. From this point, he moves on to what he sees as the central motif in *The Demolished Man*, the telepathic society within which it is set. For him, the book can stand or fall on the handling of telepathy. (It is useful to recall here that George Turner's first science fiction trilogy, written some years later, depends substantially upon telepathy.)

But George does not consider, at least in print, the consequences for his judgment if Bester claims that the centre of his novel is not the telepathic content at all, but that this is incidental to his goal, the construction of an SF thriller at which Bester seems, to the reader Turner, to have been successful.

Here is a flaw; for one would need to be very sure that one was judging a book by its cover story — in George's words it must 'be consistent within the bounds of its own convention', but this surely does not require

it to be consistent with the *reader's* convention. The question to be resolved is whether George Turner's claim that *The Demolished Man's* success or failure turns on the satisfactoriness of the depiction of telepathy is a reasonable one or not. But Turner uses this question to deal with greater matters — if the treatment of telepathy is unsatisfactory, the writer may, in addition, have been dishonest — if he knows that his treatment has been unsatisfactory. Thus, inside one uncertain question lies the worm of deceit. But if the challenge to Bester's treatment of telepathy is accurate but irrelevant, the question of honesty does not exist.

Turner's challenge to Bester takes place in a small arena: three incidents are identified and discussed. For each incident, Turner asserts there is a flaw and that Bester was aware of the flaw. That Bester, having known about the flaw, *ignores* it. In two of the three cases, in fact, Turner gives details of the method used by Bester to divert the reader's attention from the difficulty he has got himself into. It is hard to see this as a matter of *ignoring* a problem, unless one is talking about a philosophical treatise, which generally speaking those analysing a work of science fiction are not doing; certainly the writer of the thriller, which George Turner found 'a most entertaining tale', took a step which some at least might find acceptable 'within the bounds of its own convention'.

Here is the crux of the matter. It is the point of departure for George Turner's voyage into criticism; is there a double standard? Is George Turner, the first reader, he who finds *The Demolished Man* hard to put down, the reviewer, the reader for whom *The Demolished Man* was constructed, or is it George Turner, crusty critic, who at the third reading finds *The Demolished Man* hard going and full of dishonesty in its treatment of telepathy that Alfred Bester worked for in those sweaty hours in 1951? Alas, the number of seasoned George Turners reading *Galaxy* in 1951–52 was very small indeed: the author investing in time in serving those readers might find himself, ah, misdirecting his effort.

George Turner argues extensively about the *necessity* for a rationale for telepathy and the use of it in the novel. He does not, says the critic, 'suggest how telepathic powers are brought into existence' or 'discuss the techniques of using and directing these powers'. He 'never suggests a *raison d'être*'. He 'should set up some rules, and abide by them' for 'Science is dependent on rules, and even SF must obey a few, if it is to have validity or even intelligibility'.

There's something echoing in here, which needs to be spelled out: the Gernsbackian sugar-coated pill manifested in the reading of the young George Turner (if he read *Wonder Stories*), with the 'What is your Science Knowledge?' feature of the magazine, in which the young enthusiasts of science were quizzed on the extent to which they had absorbed the garbled scientific content of their favourite reading matter. (Gernsback assumed his readers had poor memories; it is remarkable how often some questions reappeared.) Science fiction, for George Turner, echoes some of that Gernsback philosophy; though Gernsback is, of course, *passé*, the *science* content of science fiction cannot be denied or even slighted. By a curious coincidence, just as *The Demolished Man* was finishing its serial run in *Galaxy*

Science Fiction, over at *Startling Stories* (March 1952) Kendall Foster Crossen was hard at work continuing to stick pins into the hot-air balloon of Gernsbackian scientism with ‘Things of Distinction’, complete with fake scientific footnotes.

One might reasonably suggest that George Turner’s feelings about the place of science in science fiction are not universally held. Yet most significant writers would not deny that science does play some part in the construction of works of science fiction. The question may not be, then, quite so absolute as George Turner’s rendering of it in his analysis of *The Demolished Man*. There is a question of degree, and perhaps one may legitimately take a softer line than he does on the authenticity of Bester’s treatment of telepathy. But certainly we have identified one of George Turner’s ultimate values with some precision: that in science fiction central scientific ideas should be worked out in some detail, and laws — ones which cannot be ignored — posited concerning those ideas.

Beyond this central concern, Turner goes on to deal with two other matters not, in 1952, much in fashion in science fiction. In a sense, these are dealt with rather more briefly than seems justified (and more briefly than one suspects the later George Turner would find satisfactory). In addressing the question of characterisation, in one paragraph Turner acknowledges that the characters are ‘very striking [and] admirably suited to the uses to which Bester puts them’ but draws to our attention the failure of these characters to develop. There’s a weakness in this paragraph which one can imagine a more careful Turner excising: he ‘wonders . . . how an ass like Ben Reich managed to hold his financial empire together’. There’s now altogether too much public evidence as to the ways in which asses *do* hold together empires of one kind or another.

The skill with which Bester has depicted the society of *The Demolished Man* is also treated harshly, again in a single paragraph. But then, taking what has gone before and adding a note about Reich, George Turner puts his case together. Although *The Demolished Man* has ‘virtues of style and speed and ingenuity’, the evidence from three distinct investigations is that it is shallow or dishonest. Dishonest, and *therefore* a bad book.

Having dealt thus with the work itself, Turner moves back from his analysis to examine the reaction of readers to *The Demolished Man*, and considers what this means about science fiction as a branch of literature. He sees two major consequences. First, the warmth with which such a book is received by the science fiction community will lead serious thinkers to reject science fiction as an object worthy of study. Second, if readers like such a work, editors and publishers will encourage the production of similar works. This also is to be deplored.

Indirectly, such a response to *The Demolished Man* will make it more difficult for writers who seek to produce science fiction of quality. For they must turn their backs on popularity.

It is far more desirable, argues Turner, to have readers with taste, and to encourage among all readers the acquisition of taste. It is to this theme that he is to return in the article ‘On Writing About Science Fiction’ late in 1968.

In this early article George Turner not only foreshadows much of the later criticism he was to write; he also outlines the basis upon which he constructed his science fiction, beginning with *Beloved Son*. Rarely, if ever, in science fiction has a writer so thoroughly described, then put into practice a theory of science fiction.

— John Foyster, *Australian Science Fiction News*, 1984

GEORGE INTRODUCES HIMSELF

Not taking it all too seriously

The Profession of Science Fiction No. 27

In his lovable essay in nostalgia, ‘The Lost Childhood’, Graham Greene declares that early reading may influence the course of a life and that it influenced his. I’m sure it is true. The books, swallowed whole as only a child can swallow them, needn’t be ‘good’ in the sense that *David Copperfield* and *Treasure Island* are approvedly literate and suitable for the young; they have only to create an impact. Marjorie Bowen’s almost forgotten *The Viper of Milan* (of sumptuous memory) was Greene’s crucial encounter in his fourteenth year, but I look back to age three and *Alice in Wonderland* as the source of my present activities and contentments.

Sixty-two years ago my father read me a chapter of *Alice* each night, month after month until, I suspect, his temper and the book fell to pieces and I could recite the entire work by heart, even (says family legend) to knowing at which word the page should be turned. Well, *Alice* is powerful stuff but family legend is only legend. As the renegade product of five generations of theatre folk (chorus lines and walk-ons with the occasional bit part — nothing fancy) I know them for fantasists who decorated scraps of incident until with repetition they hardened into unassailable history. Assisted by *Alice*, it was a promising environment for a science fiction writer *in*

posse.

Renegade status was recognised when at age 12 I decided to become a novelist rather than an actor. The family, knowing our proneness to hardheaded idiocies, wasted no time on 'he'll grow out of it' routines but mounted a massive attack spearheaded by Shakespeare, Ben Travers and W. S. Gilbert. It failed but made not a bad beginning for any kind of writer.

By then I had gulped down most of the available Jules Verne (par for the youth of the period) and the science-fictional Wells (which was not par, and I doubt I understood more than every second sentence) and was writing a vastly improved version of *A Princess of Mars* entitled 'The Prince of Mars'. This and a later epic, 'Skylark of the Universe', have not survived.

Science fiction on a regular basis had entered Australia only a year earlier when the first issue of *Amazing Stories* appeared in 1927 (the state of the mails in those days decreed that we got most things a year after the rest of the world) and, magnetised by the gaudy cover, I stole the one-and-ninepence needed to buy it. As with all my criminal ventures, the theft was discovered amid scenes of high family drama, but the seed of enchantment was sown.

It did not germinate until much later, for there was to be a greater shock to the system than even Doc Smith could provide.

At age 14, neatly paralleling Greene (though he is a dozen years older) I met my fate in a birthday copy of Sabatini's *Scaramouche* — and fell at once and forever in love with its opening line: 'He was born with the gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad.' At once, needing no physical description, I knew André-Louis whole and complete; in a *coup d'esprit* I had discovered characterisation and the evocative power of language. (W. Shakespeare, where did you fail me?) The charm of far planets never again caught me with their old power; I had discovered humanity in all its charm and variety. Or thought I had, which at 14 is certainty.

Between 18 and 23 (years larded with the usual physical and emotional excitements and blunderings), being marvellously ill educated in everything but English Composition, I wrote dramatic thrillers — Sabatini and Talbot Mundy with a dash of Leslie Charteris. None was published or submitted for publication. It is probable that my self-critical faculty worked better then than now; I knew then that the stuff was irredeemably bad whereas now I only hope it isn't. I had enough sense to realise that the road to authorship was long and all of it ahead of me.

Life was broken in two by the outbreak of war, which initiated a messy, noisy, occasionally terrifying but mostly dull six years. Sufficient to the evil thereof that I was an infantryman, which is to say, a beast of burden. There is no ASC to transport loads in the New Guinea mountains; we even carried 25-pounders, in suitably stripped-down portions, up and over and down the winding, glutinous, near-vertical Big Dipper purgatories called 'native tracks'. We lived, a day at a time.

End of an era.

Came peace — if that is the word for the last 35 years — and leisure again for reading and writing. And for science fiction? Yes, in a small way. I had never deserted

the genre completely and had been thoroughly excited by the eruption of Heinlein and Asimov, Sturgeon and Kuttner — but was now much more excited by the discovery of Patrick White and Graham Greene and Henry Handel Richardson. A great gap opened between brief exhilarations in imaginary universes and the life-long satisfactions of the literary world I wanted to join.

The gap remains; the satisfactions have had to be cut to fit the wearer.

It took me ten years to write my first novel to the point where I was satisfied with it (as a work of art, my masters — heigh-ho!) and it was accepted on its first submission. Which may have been for me a literary disaster; it encouraged a grubby talent to think itself a great one.

At this point a brief account of my time in what science-fictionists so snottily call 'the mainstream' may point the way to later entanglements.

The writer's life is classically complained of as lonely, a complaint which literary history shows to be true mostly in the cases of those who sought loneliness deliberately, at least in the great centres. Out here among the Rim Worlds it can be catastrophically true. If the writer lives and works in a small Australian country town, as I did through the years of apprenticeship and failure, it can be lonely to the point of paranoid fancy. In those dozen years I met two other writers, one as obscure as myself, the other a drunk who was a very fine writer indeed but impossible to bear with. And I believe I was every whit as drunken and impossible as he. Both were transient acquaintances. My only real contacts were an agent and a publisher, both half a world away in London, both intent on shoring up my confidence by commending my small virtues, neither saying what might have seeped through to me in a community of literary contacts — that the market was overstocked with competent novelists who could write me blind.

I know now how bad that first novel was (though both Damien Broderick and Bruce Gillespie trouble me with claims that it is better than I think — and I, viewing it from the inside, disagree with them) and that the second was pretentiously worse. Would a plunge into the gregarious literary swim of Melbourne or Sydney have made a useful difference? Hard to say, but if ambition is not enough, an eremitic and untutored ambition is still less.

Both novels received good local notices — too good for their author's good — and died of commercial anemia almost in the moment of birth, but they gained me some honour in my own country and I completed a tetralogy on the social mores of regional Victoria. One of them earned — 'obtained' might be more like it — a prestigious literary prize of great import in our Rim World and none at all in the International Empire at Galactic Centre. Only one of my first five novels earned a little money; the rest barely escaped remaindering.

By then I knew where I stood as a writer: nowhere that mattered. One more novel was to be the last fling — and it won me the new experience of a flat rejection. Nor did any other publisher want it. (Strangely, my agent and his wife never lost faith in that poor orphan and tried for years to place it, and it did in fact surface again in its own good time.)

With a number of small critical successes and finan-

cial failures on the trophy wall I decided that ambition was no substitute for talent and, so to speak, hung up my typewriter. I was sufficiently aware of hard fact to decide without rancour that there was little point in adding further fictions to the world's wastebaskets.

I had ceased to take myself over-seriously, which made a good end to another personal era.

Little did I know, as the Goons might have put it, that science fiction, in the person of John Bangsund, was at last ready to pounce.

John Bangsund circa 1967 was a youngish gent, a little higher than wide, possessed of a soft voice disguising a whim of carbon steel and earning a precarious living as a sales representative for the firm (Cassell Australia) which was in process of putting paid to my literary career. He is much the same today, plus a beard, and earns an even more precarious living from various employers who seem to be sampled and discarded before I can memorise their names. He is also one of our better-known fans, having been immortalised via Tuckerisation (why does Tucker get the credit for that ancient practice?) by James Blish in 'We All Die Naked', and the writer/publisher of a variety of highly idiosyncratic fanzines which seem to reach only a restricted circle. A belletrist, no less, and choosy with it.

He was at that time publishing *Australian Science Fiction Review* and scouting for exotic talent for its pages. He stopped me — a perfect stranger to him — in a corridor at Cassell's and announced in that gentle, steel-lined voice that he was aware that I read science fiction. In something under a minute (I swear that the Ancient Mariner figures in his genealogy) I was committed to writing 'some little thing' for *ASFR*, without fully understanding what or why.

It was, you might say, a beginning. It was probably little Alice Liddell springing her revenge after half a century.

One thing led to another, by way of shared claret bottles and the Bangsund tenacity, and I found myself contributing also to Bruce Gillespie's fledgling *SF Commentary*. Then John became, fleetingly, a journalist with the *Melbourne Age* (and there won fame by authoring a scissors-and-paste cookery book) and nepotised me into the position of SF reviewer for the feature pages. So, in 1969, without lifting a finger in anything but late-night claret orgies, I became a science fiction critic.

'Wow, but wow!' cry envious fans, 'Think of all that new hard cover SF you get for free!'

Yes, indeed — think of all that bloody junk you get and are expected to read and comment on without benefit of obscenities.

In my first year's cuttings I find Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Dick's *Ubik*, Abe's *Inter Ice Age 4*, Lem's *Solaris* and a handful of short stories from various anthologies — Aldiss's 'Far From Prague', Spinrad's 'The Big Flash', Harding's 'Dancing Gerontius', Vonnegut's 'Harrison Bergeron' — as all that remain in memory. The rest of the year's work is titles, representing stories already fallen to forgotten dust. Two notable novels, two enjoyable ones and four excellent short stories is a poor harvest from sixty-odd titles reviewed. What, I wonder, were all those anthologies fleshed out with?

And that was a *good* year. Regular reviewing is a

torment for the damned, but I needed the money. My job had collapsed along with some other fundamental pillars of my existence — but that's another story, sometimes funny and often absurd but mostly plain dull. However, I found I could stand the torrents of bilge no longer and asked that the column be discontinued. I wanted to review only the half dozen or so SF books each year that warranted critical attention (also, of course, the 'big name' products that had to be mentioned, if only destructively) and set them in the same column with the 'mainstream' novels which I was also handling. It was, I thought, a move towards getting regular reader attention from those who might not bother with the SF column. My amiable editor, who knows nothing about SF and cares less, merely nodded and smiled and let the turbulent reviewer have his way without even a symbolic squaring off for administrative combat.

(Digression: I find that word, 'mainstream', offensive in its intimation that SF is something apart from the great flow of creative writing. I used to point out, in fanzines, the tendency of major SF novels to hark back to 'mainstream' origins until one day the obvious hit me in the critical eye: SF has never left the mainstream, merely played a few creative variations — and not so many, at that. *Apartheid* was a creation of the self-immured ghetto-dwellers of the '30s and '40s and is preserved today by those who protest idiotically about the 'intellectual freedom' of the SF approach. I was to discover for myself that the SF approach can be an intellectual straitjacket.)

Nearly all the worthwhile SF between 1969 and 1981 has passed through my hands as well as much of the junk (reviewers develop a sixth sense about what will or will not repay sampling, and it rarely fails them) so I have had a continuing overview of the state of the art.

One man's view is no more reliable than another's, but I cannot see that much of importance has happened since *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Solaris* made their impact on the more thoughtful writers and readers. There have been sports, like Tom Disch's *334* or Cecelia Holland's *Floating Worlds*, one-off works of great talent whose very individuality made linear development unlikely, but no significant advances on the genre front. Moorcock's brave and ultimately effective revolution ran its course and added valuable resources of technique and intellection (once the pretention and obscurantism and textual acrobatics had died of dystrophy), but its foremost exponents — Ballard, Disch, Lafferty, Sladek and a few more — have created for themselves genres which have little to do with SF. (Nice to see that the SF ghetto-dwellers now have their very own SF mainstream which the better writers are turning their backs on.) Otherwise the mixture-as-before syndrome persists.

Among British writers one still waits on the books of a few — Roberts, Priest, Compton, Watson — hoping that the next will herald the new breakthrough but knowing in one's heart at the British SF of today is well written, whimsically odd, intellectually thorough-to-foremidable — and lifeless.

Turning to America, there's life enough in the sense of furious activity but it is allied to the standards of the TV commercial (apologies to Le Guin, Bishop and a few

more who still know what writing is about) and a mind-blowing, star-busting attitude little changed since Kim Kinnison let the galaxy know who runs things around here. As for the endless sagas, so dispiritingly uninventive . . . who cares?

There still seems to be hope in Eastern Europe. The fiction at last coming through to us in a reasonable spate is refreshing in its unexpected, almost alien points of view — but even there Lem has retired into playing intellectual games and treating the area with unproductive snobbery, while the still delightful Strugatskis have hardened into twin knots of anger and bitter jokiness.

SF is, I think, marking time. There's nothing hopeless about that; it's just reorganising and regrouping after the shakeup administered by the 'new wave'. Somewhere a new breakthrough will be gathering strength.

I seem to have wandered, so — back to 1967, when my fanzine writings quickly brought me cheers, catcalls, fanfares, furies, staunch supporters and others who would have had me turning over a slow fire.

One of the advantages of ceasing to take yourself too seriously is that you lose concern for what others think of your performance; you can concentrate on the job in hand and do it as you feel you should do it with little thought (though one has to admit the occasional snide chuckle) for the disapproval of intellectual friends, the offended reactions of dispraised writers or the abuse of their fans. Writers who choose to be offended will sometimes be hysterically offensive in return (which serves only to provide delighted readers with a taste of undignified literary blood) and their outraged fans will scorch good paper with incandescent rage. It's all clean, harmless fun, serving to separate bleating sheep from red-eyed goats.

But these entertainments are only froth on the serious critical responsibilities of giving honestly of your best, locating your own prejudices and striving to bypass them, recognising intellectual shortcomings and staying within them, seeking out the subtly good as fervently as the camouflaged bad and being always aware that gut-ripping is easy but that perceiving what in a given work has value is not necessarily as simple. The price of freedom of critical expression is your literary soul.

Add to this that the temptation to fence-sitting or timid gentleness should be resisted; it is necessary never to be afraid of being wrong when you think you have a case to put. Sooner or later you will be wrong, so then accept and admit it. I have printed a few withdrawals and admissions over the years — not many, but a few.

All this being so, my attitude towards fan criticism in Australia in the '60s was that despite valiant efforts by John Foyster and John Bangsund it scarcely existed. Think of the worst of fanzine gush swinging between 'magnificent' and 'absolute hogwash' (most reviews seemed to include one or the other) and there you have it. However, since I had let myself be conned into this *samizdat* world, I decided to enjoy it; so, with malice aforethought I chose a target and let fly with a standard-bearer of an article which damned me for ever as a poisoner of wells. I took Bester's *The Demolished Man* to pieces, not to denigrate Bester, for *TDM* remains one of the most accomplished thrillers yet produced in SF, but to light a fire under the starry-eyed who were striving to

make a major artwork of it by praising it for virtues it simply does not possess — the nonexistent 'realism' of its presentation of telepathy (riddled with inconsistencies), the quality of the presented cultural background (close to non-existent) and the 'depth of characterisation' which was no more than the skin depth required by the plot.

You don't light fires with impunity but the vehemence of the fan reaction, for and against, shook me to the point where I wondered if I had stirred up more than I could readily handle. I hadn't then learned that fandom operates only at the top of its voice. Then an appreciative letter from Robert Bloch stiffened my spine and I began to think of operating at something higher than firebug level.

(Digression for a fantale: Bob Bloch and I met at last when he visited Melbourne in 1981 for an SF film convention. On our being introduced he fixed me with a steely eye and said, 'I am most surprised to meet you; I had always thought you were a pseudonym.' I never did work out an intelligent reply to that, but we spent some pleasant hours playing do-you-remember about silent films we both saw when we were in kneepants. That sort of thing is one of the sweeter fringe benefits of the profession of science fiction.)

I felt — and still feel — that SF had a foolishly false image of itself, a pose of self-importance which would flicker out at the snap of a reality switch. Damon Knight and James Blish had tried, with little result, to take the mickey of pretension by establishing standards of *technical* criticism but it had been left to Kingsley Amis's *New Maps of Hell* to seek a grip on themes, philosophies and trends. Whether or not one agreed with his conclusions, he had opened a fine can of worms — and the great defensive battle was immediately on.

It is still on. With academic (and, all too often, pseudo-academic) criticism spreading like soft butter across the more serious SF journals, the genre's assumption of its own inherent rightness of stance and self-approval goes unchallenged today. Students, dons and all forms of literary intelligentsia burrow into the works of even the blandest authors to surface like Jack Horner's with plums of minute observation impaled on their thumbs. These plums are perhaps not unimportant in the sense of adding to the total of available information (though I feel there must be a limit to the accumulation of trivia) but their gatherers seem so often lacking in discrimination and even of any suspicion that the bland commercialism of the works of many of those examined renders them scarcely worth reading for light entertainment, let alone studying. Critical study of a work should be something of an accolade or at least an indication of unusual qualities requiring attention, yet many of the studies amount to little more than *curiosa* telling more about the ferreting abilities of the researcher than about the mediocrities of the researched.

A few obscure critics in Australia weren't likely to hole the great gasbag of fannish adulation or the round-robin puffery of authors reviewing each other, but the target was so big that only the wildest shots could fail to bring a hiss of deflation.

A few rules of warfare were to be observed: Only firmly established targets should be assailed, i.e. those

big enough to sell nonsense to an indiscriminating readership and influential enough to leave criticism helpless. The aim must be not mere destruction but to point out where undue praise had been given or proper praise withheld; the ultimate target must be critical standards rather than individuals. (If the occasional individual must bleed, let it be one whose blood was little loss to the genre.) New authors should be tacitly exempt; every writer needs a settling-in period for regrettable errors and suckering by over-enthusiastic admirers.

It all amounted to an attack on the deficiencies of a genre lulled into self-admiration by writers who whined against ghettoisation while themselves providing the reasons for its continuance — the sanctification of the second rate.

(Sad digression on the ghetto mentality: There is an awful temptation to dismiss in-group SF opinions out of hand. Quite recently an American writer of great genre repute announced to a crowded room in Melbourne that (a) James Clavell's *Shogun* is science fiction because it deals with the clash of cultures, (b) it is a greater novel than *War and Peace* and (c) that *Lucifer's Hammer* demonstrates that science fiction can challenge the 'mainstream' on its own ground. John Bangsund, who was also present, later commended my restraint in not assaulting an overseas guest and said he had feared I might succumb to a stroke. This is admittedly an outrageous example, but it can be matched among reviewers without much research.)

As a program mine sounds destructive, but destructive criticism exists only in the minds of those unable to learn from it. (*Dishonest* criticism, ignoring virtues in favour of mayhem, should not need to concern us.) And when I count up my articles over the years I find more offering admiration and praise than otherwise, but fanzine readers prefer spilt blood to the awarding of laurels so that efforts to drum up readership for such fine books as *334*, *Floating Worlds* or *Snail on the Slope* have been regarded as aberrations and achieved nothing. However, Peter Nicholls (in *Foundation* 7/8) called me 'one of the voices of sanity', so perhaps not all was wasted effort.

Indeed I was only one of the voices. John Foyster, John Bangsund and Bruce Gillespie (and later Damien Broderick) were also in the business of examining and by example raising local standards. It was the effort of a group (not always in harmony, and rightly so) of whom I happened to be the noisiest.

Planned outrage was not docilely accepted by Australian fandom. Opposition was immediate and vociferous, often personally vengeful and far too often represented by 'Who does this mainstream so-and-so think he is and what science fiction did *he* ever write?' This variation of 'If you're so clever why ain't you rich?' is one that no one should take to heart, but repetition over a period of years has a cumulative effect and the victim begins to wonder if the only way to demonstrate his capacity to his own uncertainties might not be — to write a science fiction novel. And that, as Peter Nicholls hinted in his *Encyclopedia* entry under my name, could be a perilous enterprise.

What deterred me was in part the sloth engendered by having written no fiction for ten years and in part the

lack of an attractive theme. Everything seemed to have been done before, however badly, and I have never claimed to be much of an original thinker. *Beloved Son* would not have been written if John Bangsund hadn't poisoned my rest with reminders of the opinions of others who denied my credentials. (Nor would it matter to fandom, science fiction or literature if it had not been written, but one has to begin somewhere.) John did not doubt my credentials, bless him; he was merely determined to get a book out of me and unscrupulous in his methods. (Tribal Old Man Wisdom, probably second-hand: never fear your enemies, for you know what to expect of them, but be for ever alert against the good intentions of your friends.)

I began to dabble with a group of characters in a starship, letting them bounce off each other to see what might emerge. It was my usual 'mainstream' method, but here more doodling than composing, because I had no theme. Finally I saw the obvious: that the return to Earth with new knowledge was more pertinent than their voyaging. That reversed itself into their return with old knowledge to a new world. And one thing led to another.

As a set of character studies the book didn't work too well; I think I gave more in that direction than is asked in the usual run of SF duty, but it wasn't enough. I wanted to write a novel about people rather than events and only found what dozens must have discovered before me, that in science fiction that is a damned difficult proposition. Hunting back through our century I find only two SF novels which left me feeling that the theme had been properly explored while at the same time I had moved among characters recognisable as people with human depth — J.D. Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wonder* and Tom Disch's *334*. It is this working *through* characters instead of *on* them that makes Beresford's novel so much more satisfactory than Stapledon's better-known *Odd John*, with its similar theme, and *334* a titan beside Wells's otherwise appealing *Story of the Days to Come*. Like Beresford's wonder child I look along the SF library shelves and ask, 'Is this *all*?' And by God it is.

A definition of science fiction could be: 'the fiction of altered conditions treated as reality rather than fantasy, by extension of known fact instead of simple postulation of arbitrary change'. (You don't like it? Too bad. Nobody ever likes the other bloke's definition. At least mine removes fantasy from the stew.) But the wise man who said, 'Plot is character in action' hadn't read any science fiction; there, plot is environment in action on representative specimens. Examination of character becomes almost irrelevant when the emphasis is on environmental difference.

It isn't hard to see how Beresford and Disch managed the trick of balancing character against theme, each in a different way, but theirs were one-out solutions without a general application; Disch, indeed, hasn't managed it so successfully before or since *334*. Nor, I think, has anyone else. (*1984* nearly brought it off but not quite; the preachment finally held centre stage — as it was designed to do — and the characters danced to its necessities. H. G. Wells did some neat sleight of pen by presenting his marvels through the eyes of the little, average man and gained some warmth and intimacy thereby, but in the end it was always the same little man;

the reader began to catch him at it.)

There's difficulty in writing the novel you want to write; the finished article is always so much less than the dream. You learn your limitations. Later you learn the ability of reviewers to stagger you across the spectrum of disagreement, from 'brilliant' to 'abysmal' in discussion of the same unfortunate work. In the past I had seen what could be done in rapturous welcome and minatory dismissal, but the reception of *Beloved Son* opened fresh vistas. The most crushing report arrived before the book was even offered to a publisher. An American agent said it bored him stiff and refused to offer it anywhere. My trusty English agent said that he liked it but didn't quite know what to do with it. How would it look, he asked plaintively, on a sale rack between Asimov and Heinlein? I replied, 'Much the same as between Tolstoy and Beatrix Potter', but felt privately that at last I had strained a small talent to self-destruction. Very saddening.

At which point I saw that I had fallen back into the evil habit of taking myself — and others — too seriously. So, with a 'wotthell Archie wotthell' attitude I sent it to Charles Monteith at Faber & Faber, feeling that I might as well aim high on the publishing heap, and he accepted it. (At the same time I found a publisher for poor old *Transit Of Cassidy*, which had sulked ten years in the Pending tray. It bombed disgracefully; we'll hear no more of it.)

So things were looking up — until the reviews came in. The British SF reviewers were to a man patronising, deprecating and unsure what it was about. The British non-SF reviewers were to a man enthusiastic, treating it as a novel *per se* rather than as genre work. Australian SF reviewers were cautious, deciding that it was about (a) biology, (b) politics, (c) telepathy or (d) the adventures of a returned starman. My protest that the epigraphs at the beginning said that it was about something else cut no ice with anybody. (After all, they'd heard me say often enough that the writer is the last person to understand what he has written. My own petard.) One alone — Van Ikin of the University of Western Australia — read the epigraphs, got the point and wrote the most joyous review of my career. Much better than it deserved. As in Britain the non-SF reviewers were quicker to observe the actual theme and were in general happy with it. Make what you will of that.

The Americans, almost without exception, thought it was either an adventure story or a moral tract — slow but nice if you go for that sort of thing.

Oscar Wilde decided that when critics disagree the artist is at peace with himself. Good for Oscar, but this 'artist' was merely bewildered. It seemed that the book was a flop in SF circles and a success outside them, with fence-sitters in each camp. Rather like an author running a dead heat in a one-man race. There was little to be learned from such a result.

Why continue? That answered itself. To throw off the writing bug once is possible; to beat it after re-infection

is out of the question. Besides, there are all manner of technical problems to be explored. Characterisation, for instance. There's no shortage of excuses for doing what you want to do.

Sam Johnson said, 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.' Hey, there, fellow blockheads!

And so, two more novels. Having, as I have confessed, no very original cast of mind, themes have been confined to old science fiction standbys and an attempt to present them from fresh points of view. So *Vanegloria* looks at that old chestnut, extended lifespan, from the standpoint of biological, evolutionary and psychological possibility instead of falling for the old fantasy trap of using immortality without further comment. There is much to be said about science fiction's 'received conventions' which writers use like stage props but rarely examine.

Another conception too familiar in popular literature, and blatant in science fiction, is of the soldier as either a do-or-die hero of the 'somehow he found the added strength' school or a brainwashed robot programmed for slaughter on the command, 'Kill!' It was worth writing *Yesterday's Men* (scheduled for mid-1982) as an attempt, however minor, to present him as he is — the boy next door doing his best to stay human under conditions the rational mind rejects. It is worth remembering that war and soldiers are the creation of the people who recoil from both. So what is aggression really about? It was worth a novel.

Such novels are, I suppose, part of my critical protest against science fiction's too long unchallenged view of itself and its conventions — to borrow a phrase, a continuation of criticism by other means. That the protest is unlikely to cause any ripples on the great pond of fan-feeding mixture-as-before hardly matters. I am in retirement. I don't need to make more than an adequate living — and if I did, would find a way other than boring myself stiff by writing conventional junk. So I can write what I like how I like.

It is pleasant to be as free as one can reasonably be without abandoning the world altogether; it is a condition wherein you needn't take the world seriously, or yourself. You can follow your bent without collapsing into trauma every time you discover you have been wrong again.

Next? It's a little late to start planning too far ahead, but it would be interesting to do something on future development of the drama. Nobody has yet produced a really imaginative idea of the future of that most ancient of man's overt attempts to contemplate himself as saint and devil . . .

— *Foundation*, No. 24, February 1982

In the years before George discovered the Australian SF community, he and his early non-SF books had their champions within Australian literature — especially Stephen Murray-Smith, founder editor of *Overland*, one of Australia's leading literary magazines. After George began writing mainly about science fiction, he still wrote occasionally for *Overland* — hence the following article (No. 87, May 1983). The book whose Preface George is claiming to write in this article eventually became *In the Heart or in the Head* — whose Preface is quite different from the one below.

AGAIN GEORGE INTRODUCES HIMSELF

Some unreceived wisdom

Scene: Spring Street, Melbourne, outside the Princess Theatre, time about nine-thirty, the first interval of *Norma*.

Inside, the singing had been stirring enough but the opera seemingly staged in a coal cellar, lit only by the whites of the singers' eyes; I'll swear they *felt* their way around. The night, on the footpath, was brighter.

There Stephen Murray-Smith, editor of *Overland*, and I, in our guises as opera buffs, played 'long time no see' and he congratulated me on my Lit. Board grant. When I expanded on the book I proposed to write in the time donated by the Board's largesse, he demanded a chapter for *Overland* — at once. A sucker for flattery, I agreed with those same stars in my eyes that shone there in 1958 when my first book was accepted for publication. You never quite get over being sought after, even in a small way, do you?

Without change of pace, he added a demand for a review of the Patrick White autobiography, named a deadline two months too close, and vanished smoothly into the crowd.

As I write this the White piece is done (farewell to a hoped-for idle Christmas) but the damned book is not properly into the planning stage. It would be an unprofitable exercise to guess at the content of a middle chapter and write it here and now; an alternative might be to begin at the beginning and write the first chapter, but my still uncertain idea of the shape of the work suggests that the opening pages will be tangential stuff, scene-setting, not touching the nub of the book.

It will be an unorthodox work, partly autobiographical and partly a collection of interpolated but relevant essays on science fiction and criticism. It will be in one sense a book about the things most people, including Australian reviewers, don't know about science fiction, and about the mildly insane people who inhabit the genre ambience as well as the very sane people who create that part of the genre which is worth attention; in another it will be a pursuit of the inevitability of events, foreshadowed in childhood, which drove a respectable writer of staidly respectable novels to throw his cap over the moon at the age of sixty and start a fresh career as a writer of science fiction.

The book requires a Preface, if only to explain why I should think it worth writing . . . perhaps by the end of it I will have a better idea of how to go about this work

entitled *Not Taking It All Too Seriously* (the publisher will probably want the title changed, but it expresses my feeling about the book and its writer.)

So, herewith:

PREFACE

Constant Lambert — composer, conductor and critic — complained many years ago of 'the appalling popularity of music', referring to the too-easy accessibility of gramophone and radio and the resulting clamour of the second rate assaulting the ear at every turn. Opera and symphony were firmly cornered in a shrinking number of theatres and halls while dance rhythms and the ear-catching jingles of advertising curdled the public air.

Something similar has happened to science fiction. When in 1960 Kingsley Amis fluttered the critical doves with a serious critique of the genre, *New Maps of Hell*, faithful readers who had served their time through the dreadful pulp era felt that faith had paid off, science fiction had made the grade, come of age, justified its existence, entered into its kingdom . . . Well, maybe.

Amis's book (which flushed a fair number of academic closet fans out of hiding into timidly approving postures) appeared when the genre was preparing at last to sow some literary wild oats, to attempt fresh modes of thought and expression; this brought about a sort of in-group 'new wave' (so referred to), which bid fair to wash away the death rays, mad scientists, paranoid dictators, invaders from the fourth dimension and the whole ancient and creaking apparatus of the aficionado's delight. And not before time.

It was about then, also, that bad science fiction became a threat to reading taste. Now it has spread across the body of popular fiction to the point where it has been calculated that about ten per cent of the world's annual production of novels belongs directly or marginally with the genre. This means that hundreds of authors are struggling for a slice of a mass-ingredient bonanza cake and scores of publishers are pouring out the resulting pulp-magazine-style junk — and selling it. It is as though science fiction's largely successful attempt to reshape itself in a quality image had never been made.

It is not true that the bad drives out the good, but it can make the good damned difficult to find. An abysmal

standard of genre criticism further obscures the existence of science fiction with reasonable claims to literary and intellectual excellence.

Sheer gaudiness of cover design and blurb writing, seeking the lowest common denominator of appreciation, often belies and disgraces the honest nature of the contents.

Given such taste-destroying conditions of propagation, it is little wonder that the rise of a limited and cautious academic interest has done nothing to alter the commonly received wisdom that science fiction does not warrant serious acceptance. Even my acquaintances in the literary business, who should know better, prefer to tacitly ignore my foray into writing the stuff. 'Can't say I've read much of it' is the standard evasive manoeuvre, and my uncivil response that the loss is theirs deepens no friendships.

So, perhaps, my flouting of the received wisdom that 'science fiction is junk' needs some justification. Received wisdom is not totally wrong; most science fiction *is* junk. So — when the mass of production is compared with the worthy — are most films, novels, plays, operas, paintings, poems, songs and criticism. What concerns me here, and should concern received wisdom if ever it stopped to think, is the small percentage of science fiction which is not junk, not immediately disposable. It will be a large part of the concern of this book.

For the rest, this will be the sad/hilarious tale of my literary career, such as it has been, all anecdotes and character sketches . . . but don't let yourselves be taken in — this autobiographical element is only a rack of hooks on which to hang discussions of one of the least understood facets of today's literature.

My personal involvement began in 1919 with myself, aged three, seated enthralled in my father's lap while he read *Alice in Wonderland* to me. The connection between *Alice* and science fiction may not be obvious but it is a strong one: Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, if he lived still, would see it at once. As a mathematician he was impelled to write 'nonsense' stories which scholarship has discovered to turn acutely on mathematical propositions and philosophical speculations as much as on the observation of human absurdity. Many a science fiction writer uses similar methods and sources, burying them just as thoroughly though not as wittily in plot and situation. Such writers as R. A. Lafferty, J. G. Ballard and even Arthur C. Clarke must recognise Lewis Carroll as a not-too-distant cousin.

Naturally I did not understand all this at age three, but I did understand — as does every child until life teaches him differently — that marvels are not necessarily spun of moonshine and that *Alice's* adventures made perfectly good sense. Later I was weaned to the idea that these were fantasy, *not real*. Meaning that a work which has held English-speaking humanity enchanted for 116 years deals in unrealities? If you believe that, stop reading at once; my book is not for you.

The recognition of reality, not grasped but immanent, just beyond perception, is what links *Alice* with science fiction. *Alice* is fantasy only in the most superficial classification; it is, at least in part, absurdist fun-poking, and absurdism is a technique science fiction uses often and well and not always in fun. I refer you

again to R. A. Lafferty, and add the names of Michael Moorcock and Ray Bradbury as two that spring at once to mind. You don't know their work? I fall back on my arrogant insult that the loss is yours.

In that last paragraph lurks a nettle for grasping. I have separated science fiction from fantasy while admitting that it sometimes uses the methods of fantasy, but have not said what science fiction is — and many a sturdy critic has foundered on that rock of definition.

This is why: 'science fiction', heard from the mouth of the rampant fan, refers to a literary spectrum spanning H. G. Wells and the *Flash Gordon* comic strips as well as Lucian of Samosata and Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall'; the Epic of Gilgamesh has been cited as a direct ancestor, as has the Book of Genesis, on the ground that it presents a consistent if scientifically suspect cosmology. In spite of Robert Graves's protests, *Seven Days in Crete* was noisily claimed for the genre at a New York convention, lumping it in with practically any fiction which on the one hand departs from strict realism and on the other deals, however tenuously, with science. Incompatibility of the hands is not admitted, probably not noticed. (Would you believe *Voss* and *Martin Arrow-smith*? Many a fan will.) The detective story with its forensic gadgetry is easy prey; horror stories and occultism are gathered in under the headings of psychology and metaphysics; the Western has proved difficult, but is regularly raped of plot material for transfer to alien worlds. The historical novel is not immune; in Bulwer's *Last of the Barons* an alchemist invents the steam engine out of strict chronology, and John Cowper Powys's *The Brazen Head* is powerful science on the part of Roger Bacon. There is no end to the stupidities of fannish plundering.

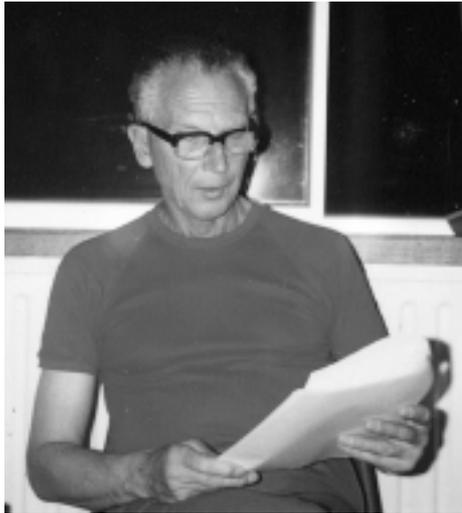
Do I now propose to capture so vast a field of bloody nonsense in a single smallish book?

I do not. I shall rid myself of nearly all the nonsense by explaining now what I mean when I write the phrase 'science fiction'. It will be a personal definition which most inhabitants of fandom will decry as pedantic, restrictive and elitist (I must find room somewhere in the book to dwell awhile on the use of 'elitist' as a pejorative term; there's food for laughter there) but will at least rid us of *Flash Gordon* and the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The argument runs thus: the school of thought — if 'thought' be the *mot juste* — which claims that the origins of science fiction are to be found in myth, legend and fantasy can be dismissed as pseudo-literary; *all* fiction finds its origins there. A useful definition must locate the point where the special attributes and mental attitudes displayed in science fiction become sufficiently differentiated from the general concerns of fiction to justify recognition as a genre.

My stand is that science fiction is not basically a product of fantasy but is *opposed* to the purely imaginative method of fantasy. I see it as a *logically derived presentation of activities and their consequences taking place under conditions which, while scientifically admissible, represent life and the universe not as we know them but as under changed circumstances they could be*.

'Scientifically admissible' are the words which eliminate fantasy, the sword and sorcery epic (usually too deliberate to masquerade even as fantasy) together with the cheaper and sillier forms of space opera and bizarre



George Turner in action, 1979 (George Turner Estate collection)

adventure romance. My definition leaves us with those novels and stories in which genuine thinking about physical, sociological and psychological issues is the backbone of the work. One needn't demand polymathic genius in the author, only a commitment to logical extrapolation and common sense.

While open to correction by those better versed in literary history, I see Thomas More's *Utopia* as the first fiction wherein a practicable alternative society was intellectually conceived and presented in narrative form. Basically, that is what all responsible science fiction seeks to do, whatever direction it may take. Francis Bacon added the hardware and physical gimmickry to the method a century or so later, in *The New Atlantis*, and the genre as we know it was born. (The whole argument is, of course, longer and stronger than this, but the chapter is yet to be written.)

My definition spreads its net widely enough to include every work in the genre which has earned continuing critical regard. Even *The Lord of the Rings* and Le Guin's 'Earthsea' trilogy hover, for reasons to do with logic and derivation, in that no-man's-land at the edge of all definitions where genres borrow from each other to merge and overlap.

Here, in the pause before a slight change of direction, let me note why I use the phrase 'science fiction' rather than the abbreviation 'SF', which is a trap for the unwary. 'SF' does not necessarily stand for 'science fiction'; it can be expanded also as 'science fantasy', a hybrid for readers and authors who know no science but like their derring-do set in far futures or on alien worlds. For the very eminent (within the genre) Samuel Delany who, if he knows any science, hides it under snowblinding pseudo-erudition, it stands for 'speculative fiction'; I don't know why — I have never caught him actually speculating in any of his stories. There is a third revisionist school which, with tongue in cheek I hope, plumps for 'scientific fantabulation', which means whatever you think it does.

Do you wonder that I favour conservative, fuddy-duddy, merely mindblowing 'science fiction'?

With science fiction's appalling popularity (using the

all-encompassing fan definition) has come an increasing and I sometimes think appalling academic respectability. (Not the same thing as public respectability.) Quality 'small' magazines featuring reviews and theme articles by highly qualified persons proliferate in America and have a foothold in Britain, where Oxbridge dons review science fiction for *The Times Literary Supplement* and other emblems of taste; American colleges and universities provide more than a thousand courses in science fiction — teaching what? I wonder — and the North East London Polytechnic supports the British Science Fiction Foundation.

Australia has so far escaped the worst of this academic interest but the future looks grim. Michael Tolley of Adelaide University has joined forces with Kirpal Singh of the National University of Singapore to edit a volume of essays on science fiction, *The Stellar Gauge*, the Australian National University in Canberra has staged a seminar on Speculative Fiction (playing safe with the definition game); Van Ikin of the University of Western Australia publishes a magazine, *Science Fiction*, which teeters on the brink of serious academicism. The Higher Criticism is at our gates; we tattered and indigent writers had better watch with narrowed gaze.

(That I provided an ill-tempered essay for *The Stellar Gauge*, took part in the ANU seminar and have written several pieces for Van Ikin does not involve confrontation of beliefs and practice. Inviting me into academic fields is always a risky procedure — though I did behave myself properly in Canberra — and likely to produce anything but the gentlemanly contribution expected. Usually, but not always, the Higher Criticism grinds its teeth and puts up with me.)

I have no basic quarrel with academics and their high-powered critical tools — I wish I had a comparable training — but I object to their use of the tools for scraping easy theses from the surface soil when what science fiction needs is excavation in chunks. You might imagine that under the pressure of such intellectual muscle science fiction would improve by leaps and bounds. Not a bit of it; it is, if not in the literary doldrums, at least in a period of coasting with much the same cargo as in the late '60s. You might imagine also that Academia would have addressed itself to the problem of a definition of a genre, if only to ensure that in discussion everybody meant the same thing by the same words. Not a bit of that either; Academia avoids controversy like the plague; no Leavis/Snow uproars in our tidy community. I have tried to start an uproar or two; no takers.

Academia concentrates on producing the unassuming minor paper on some facet of an aspect, where an impressive bibliography affirms research and takes the place of thought. A raffle through recent copies of *Foundation*, the organ of the British Science Fiction Foundation, provides a depressing cross-section of critical interests:

John Dean (University of Paris XIII): 'The Science Fiction City'.

Brian Stableford (lecturer in sociology at Reading University and space opera novelist): 'Man-made Catastrophe in SF'.

Colin Greenland (Writing Fellow at the Science Fiction Foundation): 'From Beowulf to Kafka: Mervyn Peake's *Titus Alone*'. (I'm not kidding; read on.)

Kenneth Bailey (ex-BBC, otherwise apparently harmless): 'Spaceships, Little Nell and the Sinister Cardboard Man: A Study of Dickens as Fantastist and as a Precursor of Science Fiction'.

These are competent and moderately interesting essays, researched to the point of exhaustion, replete with references and quotation, progressing remorselessly from Intention through Exposition to Argument and Conclusion — and all about as useful to the understanding of science fiction as muscular dystrophy to a coalheaver. The titles of the Greenland and Bailey articles announce that their authors accept without question the idea that legend and fantasy are relevant to and ancestors of, if not actually to be equated with, science fiction. They not only fail to question this relationship but proceed as if it were received wisdom, whereas the forms have little in common beyond a certain bizarre in their use of story apparatus. Australian criticism, which hasn't as yet done much thinking for itself, also follows this line with slavish obedience to overseas models.

Yet fantasy operates *in spite of* reality; it is arbitrary; you are required to accept because the writer says so. The science fiction writer cannot merely 'say so'; he must demonstrate, must justify each departure from the known norm and at every step relate firmly to the real world.

There is always, as admitted, an area of overlap, but as a lifelong devotee of both Dickens and science fiction I find their relevance to each other tenuous in the extreme; the trendy title of the article gives a fair clue to the preciousness of the conception. The Beowulf-Kafka article is solid stuff for a Writing Fellow justifying his grant; it simply isn't relevant to science fiction.

Scrabbling through the corpus of world literature for connections has produced a vast number of essays which surely serve to fill tiny niches in the total understanding but do little to promote the overview without which science fiction will remain in fan-dominated chaos.

Authors, who should be the beneficiaries of informed criticism, get little of use from the work of the professional critics. They must instead observe each other, noting each success or failure in the unending struggle with relevance, technique and intellection at the far-out edges of fiction and trying to fit it into their understanding of what they are doing.

The academic criticism which could do much to open up perspectives in this genre which is so uncertain even of its identity, prefers to concentrate on trivia. It should be asking: What is science fiction? What is its relevance to the real world? What is the social significance of the hunger of the young for futurology and fantasy? Can extrapolative science fiction indeed act, as has been claimed, as a buffer against 'future shock'? Has science fiction brought anything new to the techniques and interests of fiction? And, on the technical side, why is characterisation so singularly lacking in the work of even the most competent science fiction writers?

The list of basic questions needing answers can be

extended much farther and the answers are less obvious than the uninvolved may guess. I shall have to grapple with all of them before this book is done.

Unfortunately the nonsense doesn't stop with the literati. At the other end of the critical scale the journeymen, the reviewers for periodicals and newspapers, have much to answer for. Let me quote J. G. Ballard on the subject (he refers to the writers of short reviews for *Foundation*, people who should know the difference between the genuine article and shoddy): '... there seems to be a vast discrepancy between the high-flown perorations from the mouths of the critics and what is actually being produced by the writers...' (*Foundation* 23; 'Letters' section).

That says it all; they can't tell good from bad or, if they can, blur distinction in that pursuit of 'balanced reviewing' which tends to magnify tiny virtues for setting against horrendous faults. For science fiction's sake it may be time to say, 'To hell with balanced reviewing' and get into the business of treating books with the respect or disrespect they deserve. I am not advocating slaughter, merely an understanding that there is more bad fiction published than good and that among the good only a very small fraction is superior. It is an attitude which, put into practice for some fifteen years past, has made me a few enemies among science fiction writers who confuse adulation with talent but more friends among those who are pleased to see someone laying a firm finger on the overpublicised nonsense they know is fudged and second rate.

It is probable that the only useful science fiction criticism to be found in Australia is published in Bruce Gillespie's *SF Commentary*, with Van Ikin's *Science Fiction* as runner-up and the rest nowhere. In the general welter of thoughtlessness and plain obtuseness it is a wonder that such writers as Brian Aldiss, Doris Lessing, the Strugatski brothers, Ursula Le Guin, Gene Wolfe, John Sladek, Thomas M. Disch, Michael Moorcock, J. G. Ballard, Ian Watson, D. G. Compton and a few more have been able to maintain standards of good writing and intellectual honesty. The financial gravy goes to the junk purveyors, with the reviewers solidly behind them.

You will by now have tumbled to the fact that what began as a Preface has got out of hand and begun to take on the hue of a manifesto. It plainly will not make a Preface, but it has made for me a fine draughting board on which to lay out the general lines of attitude and subject matter which had not been firmly formulated before. I know now what the hurdles are and how high the jumps must be in a combative, contentious book full of kicking against the pricks (and mixed metaphors, no doubt), designed to irritate those who need irritating and to amuse all others.

And the autobiographical element? I promise that all these snarlings, arguments and exhortations will be wrapped in incident and experience, the best of it verging on the incredible, some of it mildly traumatic and all of it leading to the understanding of how and why at pensionable age a new, probably unimportant but thoroughly entertaining career has opened for a novelist who had, so to speak, hung up his typewriter.

In June 1967, when this article appeared, *Australian Science Fiction Review*, edited by John Bangsund in association with John Foyster and Lee Harding, had already put Australia on the world SF map for the first time in a decade. The publication of George Turner's first article, 'The Double Standard', helped to give Australian fandom a literary reputation that lasted into the mid-1970s. It's not clear whether or not George had read William Atheling Jr's (James Blish's) *The Issue at Hand* before writing this article, but comparisons between Blish and Turner were made from then on. I can see that in much of his later criticism George Turner backed away from some of the assertions in this article. After he published his own first SF novel, he became a lot more forgiving of other authors' failings. However, he never abandoned his love of excellence and his contempt for science fiction's sacred cows (ideas, not people). Perhaps telepathy, and hence *The Demolished Man*, was merely unlucky to be the first of George's kickable cows.

Famous First Words

GEORGE TURNER'S FIRST ARTICLE:

The double standard:

The short look, and the long hard look

In the course of private exchanges John Bangsund and I have touched on the vexed question of the difference between reviewing and criticism. With his concurrence, I quote John:

'When you mention the "separate and distinct functions of reviewing and criticism" I wonder if you mean what I call the double standard? There are books and there is literature . . . one must often find books which are vastly entertaining but which fall short of being literature. . . . The double standard comes in when one says, This is great SF — but let's not delude ourselves that it's literature.'

Whether or not he really holds this view (he may merely have thrown it out as a hook to force me to a definitive statement) I as a professional writer cannot subscribe to it. Bluntly, *all* books are literature — good literature or bad literature. The only standard by which a book can be measured in a qualitative fashion is to set it alongside the best we know and apply certain tests. The nature of these tests can be discussed later.

There is no double standard, but there are differing functions among the assessors of books, the two best known of the assessors being the reviewers and the critics. Broadly, the reviewer does little more than give the reader of his periodical a guide to what is on the market. He reads a great number of books, reads them in a hurry because he has a deadline to meet, and attempts little more than a superficial relation of the work's most obvious qualities: his own immediate reaction is for or against, and this colours his assessment. He has neither the time nor the distance in perspective to do more; he may condemn the worthwhile because its

less evident qualities elude his swift reading, which is bound to fasten on surfaces rather than on total content, and he may praise the worthless because his immediate pleasure causes him to make undue allowance for the weaknesses which he perceives hurriedly but cannot stop to analyse. In the long run he says little more than that he liked the book or he didn't like it. If your taste happens to match with his, then he is a good reviewer for you.

But he is of no use at all to the writer or to the serious reader who considers literature a major amenity of civilisation, one which must be treated with exactness and great care.

The job of the critic is much more taxing. He must be able to see the book in perspective — in relation to the writer's other work, in relation to its particular genre, in relation to literature as a whole, and in relation to the civilisation of which it is a part. He must assess it not only as a good or a bad book, but as a useful or a useless book, one which adds to or detracts from the author's total stature and as one which will or will not have some effect on the culture whose existence made it possible. Other matters also, but mainly those.

Writers read him with care, note his remarks and his references, assess his conclusions and give much consideration to his summation of their weaknesses. They don't allow critics to dictate to them — far from it — but they do appreciate the thinking of minds which have paid them the compliment of considering them worthy of the immense labour which goes into good criticism. I have on two occasions written letters of thanks to critics who pointed out faults which were hidden from me and

the discussion of which has made a difference to my writing and my approach to literary problems of style, construction and presentation.

To the student and serious reader the critic can be an opener of doors, a pointer out of missed values, a guide to pleasures and excitements denied to the reader whose goal is entertainment only. Emotional pleasure is not enough; it is transient and soon exhausted. A good book must give emotional pleasure or it is not a good book, but the final criterion is intellectual pleasure, which makes a book not a thing of the moment but a part of one's experience of life, as easy to browse over and reread as it is to listen to a favourite song repeated or to turn again and again to a fine painting.

To sum up, the reviewer is concerned with the impression of the moment for the reader of the moment; the critic is concerned with causes, effects and ultimate values.

As a demonstration of the great gulf in these functions I propose to take a popular and much-lauded SF novel and treat it on several levels of criticism. *The Demolished Man*, Hugo winner, good seller and earner of rave reviews, will do nicely, particularly as it has lately been republished by Penguin, and first appeared sufficiently long ago to allow its position in the body of SF to be fairly assessed.

But first my qualifications for discussing SF at all:
SF reader — 39 years.

Student of literature — 30 years.

Novelist (with a reasonable local standing) — 10 years.

Practising critic — since I commenced this article 30 minutes ago.

And so to business.

First, the magazine editor who receives the ms of *The Demolished Man*: He demands a moderate literary standard, but is more interested in other qualities. His impression runs somewhat thus:

. . . hard, incisive style, very compulsive . . . plenty of action . . . 80,000 words, three- or four-parter, will divide well into either . . . telepathy a staling subject, but the writing will carry it . . . violent without being unnecessarily sadistic, will go down well . . . scientific basis pretty doubtful, but most of the weak points fairly well covered . . . terrific tension and speed, should be a winner.

Then the reader, jolted out of his pants and writing feverishly to his favourite magazine:

Dear Ed,

Demolished Man is a winner. But a WINNER!!! Boy, am I caught up in this one. It's absolutely real, but REAL. And can that Bester write! Get more like this, one every month, and I'm hooked for life. After this no one can doubt that telepathy is something real, and the scoffers can go (unmentionable and impossible) themselves. Never before have I had such a kick out of . . .

And so on until he runs out of nonsense and relaxes gasping to wait pop-eyed and panting for the next issue.

This kind of appreciation hasn't even the justification of the editor's hardboiled but practical summation, but appears so brutally often as to give one severe doubts about the mental level of the average SF reader.

The book is submitted for hardcover publication and a publisher's reader submits his report:

. . . the background is such that it has to be labelled science fiction, but in fact the scientific content is negligible, and the story is really a hardboiled, fast-moving thriller. On this level it is entertaining stuff and should go down well with the science fiction public. Others may find it a bit too far out for easy digestion. Characterization is almost entirely absent, the persons being cardboard types set up in a few words and developing not at all; since the persons of the story are extreme types, this is probably as well, for they wouldn't stand much psychological penetration. The great strength of the book is the compulsively readable style. We should publish this on the SF list . . .

Sam Moskowitz gets at it for one of his fabulous parodies of appreciation:

This magnificent novel sets a new literary standard in SF. Bester fulfils the promise shown in his trail-blazing short stories and crowns his career with a coruscating cascade of sheer genius. This novel marks a new development in SF . . .

I don't know whether the ineffable Sam ever did a review of *The Demolished Man*, but perhaps my version wouldn't be far wrong.

A daily newspaper takes a cautious fling:

A solid, craftsmanlike work, full of action and ingenuity. The author is a very talented man with a flair for making the noisy nonsense of science fiction seem most real. The brutal, pared-down style is admirably suited to the brutal, pared-down story, but is relieved by flashes of compassionate understanding . . .

Robert Gerrand notices it for *ASFR* (I quote the most relevant portions of his review):

One of the strong points . . . is the author's ability to write so convincingly about psi powers. He not only makes you believe they exist — he makes you believe they *should* exist. And this he does by the brilliant way he sketches in his societies . . . These societies are not mere backdrops . . . but vivid, necessary parts of the story . . . [they] give meaning to the characters' actions: we see how the environment influences the whole.

With all good will I contend that Mr Gerrand has created virtues that are simply not present and missed those that are. Let's see what the critic does to it after a long, hard look.

The critic has done his homework. He read the book when it first appeared and found it a most entertaining

tale, hard to put down; but he was troubled by subconscious awareness that all was not as well as appeared on the surface. So, after a reasonable lapse of time he read it again, and then knew definitely that the author had subjected him to a brilliantly loaded snow job. Ten years later he read it again, in order to write this article, and found it hard going — the tricks and glosses and deliberate misrepresentations stood out like blackbirds on the snow.

Now, *The Demolished Man*, Hugo and all, occupies a high place in the SF canon. Question: Does it deserve this high place? It purports to be an SF thriller. Questions: Is it good SF and is it a good thriller? Reviewers and editors have made much of the lifelike delineation of existence in a telepathic society. Question: What in fact does Bester tell us about such an existence?

Overriding question: Does this book in fact represent a high point in the development of SF, or is it a high-grade example of how to do it and not get caught?

Having asked himself these questions and a dozen others, the critic set himself to the typewriter, and this is what he wrote:

The Demolished Man is an ingenious thriller constructed and plotted by an ingenious man. It is, perhaps, altogether too ingenious for its own good as a novel, for the reader is hurled from event to event and idea to idea without pause for breath or thought, much less pause to consider an idea and evaluate its validity.

Any work of fiction must be consistent within the bounds of its own convention; a work of SF must be consistent within the bounds of the speculative ideas embodied in it, and those speculative ideas must hold up under scrutiny. If they do not, the work is no longer SF but fantasy or daydream, and loses validity accordingly. Since *The Demolished Man* rests on the conception of telepathy, the whole book stands or falls by the handling of that subject.

Bester provides spectacular passages showing telepathy in action, but is never foolish enough to suggest how telepathic powers are brought into existence or to discuss the techniques of using and directing these powers. He makes statements, but never suggests a *raison d'être*. He hits the reader over the head, says 'this is how it is and don't ask silly questions', and so leaves himself a bare field in which he can do as he pleases because questioning what he does is tacitly barred.

But even with this limitless arena in which to play he trips over his own ankles more than once. For instance, there is a short scene in which the detective is pleased to discover the protective thickness of his hotel-room walls, because it will shut out the incessant telepathic gabble of the world's thinking. (So Bester's telepathic function is susceptible to the usual laws governing the behaviour of radiation, is it? The non-telepathic majority would very quickly adopt effective baffles to prevent 'peeping'.)

It appears, then, that the telepaths must exist in a world of appalling, never-ceasing noise, comparable to the position of yourself or myself doomed to spend his life in a never-silent crowd, working desperately hard to separate one intelligible message from the uproar.

This short scene makes it apparent that Bester was well aware of this difficulty, and removed it by simply

ignoring it. And this piece of cheating encourages us to look for more of the same. Such snow-blinding would be unforgivable in a mainstream thriller, and must be considered equally unforgivable in SF. A writer may and must break a lot of rules, but he cannot throw them overboard and pretend they never existed or don't apply to him.

Then there is the telepathic game of building sentence figures. This commits Bester to the admission that his telepaths think in words, not in total impressions. Therefore this game can be played vocally also. I suggest you get a few friends and try it some time; you will soon discover the simple reasons why it can't be done on the complex scale presented in the party scene. The intention of the scene, apart from its role in the plot, seems to have been to impress the reader with the realistic possibility of telepathy. In fact Bester simply presents another *fait accompli* which tells nothing except that the author says 'you gotta believe me, see!' The poor reader has been hit over the head again, and the action moves on while he is still groggy. Never give the poor so-and-so time to think, or all is lost!

Swiftly we come to the matter of the 'tension, apprehension' rhyme. A neat trick, but still a trick. Ben Reich is presented as filling his thinking with this thing whenever telepaths are present who may peep him. Either the telepaths are pretty weak or Reich is concentrating in a fashion which would effectively prevent him carrying on a conversation (which he does) or even of sparing enough attention to hear a sentence spoken to him. The slightest distraction entering his mind would break the interference rhyme and he would be wide open. In any case, the human ability to concentrate without interruption is measurable in seconds, so Bester has played another trick with his snowballs. This time he has falsified the known capacities of humanity. He was aware of this, too. If you read the relevant passages you will discover some careful wordplay designed to divert your notice from the technical difficulty of bringing off the interference feat.

I have now accused the writer of wilful dishonesty with his theme. These are not slips in Bester's thinking; he was aware of the problems, as the text shows, but ignored them because to admit their existence would have made his premise impossible and his plot unworkable.

(Short digression on telepathy in SF. If you are going to introduce telepathy as an operating proposition in a story, you must first have some basic idea of what telepathy is, and how it works. You are free to invent, because the properties and laws are unknown, but if you are to do anything more than wish-fantasy you must devise some framework wherein the talent operates. You should set up some rules, *and abide by them*. If you want to speak of projecting a thought, you must first give some thought to the possibility of a mental mechanism whereby such projection might be accomplished and *controlled* by the projecting person. One reads airy mention of mind blocks, controlled invasion of resisting minds, telepathic shouts and other acrobatic mental performances. It's about time someone gave thought to the question of how such things could be accomplished. I take leave to doubt that the first full-scale telepath will simply do these things without understanding how he

does them, and is more likely to be forced into some lengthy psycho-anatomical investigation before he can begin to do anything at all. Even baby seals have to be *taught* to swim. There's a good story waiting to be written about the purely mechanical problems of the first telepath. No copyright — the idea is free to anyone who cares to use it. All present uses of telepathy in SF are pure fantasy. Science is dependent on rules, and even SF must obey a few if it is to have validity or even intelligibility.)

The Demolished Man has been praised for its strong characterisation. There is little hint of characterisation anywhere in the book. There is a forceful presentation of each *type* as he or she appears, but nothing more. The characters never develop beyond our first meeting with them and are as predictable as the sunrise. They are very striking characters, admirably suited to the uses to which Bester puts them, but no more than that. Brilliant puppets, but puppets. One wonders occasionally how an ass like Ben Reich managed to hold his financial empire together; he is shown as too narrow, emotional and unstable to manage anything much more complicated than a news stall. He wouldn't have needed driving to destruction; he would have fallen to it.

Finally, we must consider the hou-ha about vivid presentation of the society in which the tale takes place.

What society? Aside from Ben Reich and the telepaths we are presented with a brothel which is only a gimmicked-up version of a classy whorehouse anywhere at any time and a peculiarly stupid party wherein the hostess is caricatured to represent the social/wealthy/silly set. It is the same caricature to be met with in any satirical novel set in this day and age. Oh, sure, we have space ships and telepaths and a playboy satellite, but if these things have had any deep effect on social attitudes and behaviour we are not told of it. The society of his novel is indeed a backdrop, and a mighty sketchy one at that. The society of *The Demolished Man* is the familiar twentieth-century milieu with some technological trimmings and some telepaths whose existence is suspect because of the anomalies in the writer's account of their talent.

Be it noted also that when it came to the demolition of Reich's mind, Bester was wonderfully vague about that, too. Just what *did* they do to him? The obvious treatment would be to remove his memories (and hence the formative influences of his environment) and start him afresh with a push in the right direction. But just what are these monsters demolishing? In a haze of words we never find out. But it makes a nicely sadistic close to the action and gives the detective an opportunity to think up some completely pointless blather about the future of re-educated humanity.

One can only conclude, then, that *The Demolished Man*, when all its virtues of style and speed and ingenuity are admitted, is a faked-up job, and therefore a bad book. That doesn't make it bad entertainment — so long as the reader realises it is just that and no more. The snow job, and hence the dishonesty, arises from the attempt to cover the whole shenanigans with a gloss of deep importance. Plenty of readers and reviewers were fooled, which makes it a successful exercise, but the same could be said of making money with the thimble and pea trick.

What irritates more than anything is the fact that Bester can write thoughtful and serious SF. His short stories are among the best the genre has produced. But in the novel form his weaknesses stand pitilessly revealed, and this is especially noticeable in his non-SF crime novel (can't remember the title) where all the SF trappings are absent and the poor characters stand revealed in all their uninteresting sameness. Even the outré touch of murder motivated by homosexual jealousy cannot enliven it, nor the careful psychological exploration of character put breath into the cast. As for *The Stars My Destination*, my remarks on *The Demolished Man* apply almost in toto. In that book Bester makes the mistake of providing too much information about teleportation without plugging the holes in the techniques involved, and goes through the same routine of drowning the critical faculty in louder and faster avalanches of action.

It remains only to consider the position of *The Demolished Man* in the SF canon, and the conclusions are not sweet.

The book won a Hugo. One can only surmise that either the year was a poor one for novels, or that the judges were hypnotised by the snowstorm of style and movement. The book is a triumph of style over content and inconsistency. It was, unfortunately, the kind of book which encourages serious critics to regard SF as irresponsible and unimportant, and its readers as sadly lacking in discernment.

More deadly is the thought that readers liked it so well, and that editors exist to give the readers what they demand. If this is a sample of what they demand, then SF will be, for the majority, never more than a titillation of the emotions. While readers demand, writers must supply, all but the few who say 'to hell with the readers' and strike out in the direction of quality at all costs.

With those few lies the future of SF. On present signs it does not lie with the readers. They applaud the occasional literate venture (*A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *A Case of Conscience*) but give scant attention to works which pose problems of approach and understanding, though it is these that show the way. *Odd John* remains the most perceptive of all superman novels and Budrys's *Rogue Moon* the most impressive attempt to grapple with the allying of SF with human problems; but what chance has such work in a magazine-ridden genre where Retief and his idiocies gain the plaudits of the crowd, monstrosities like *Skylark Duquesne* can appear in a magazine which has just won a Hugo as the best of the year, and a piece of painfully secondhand Talbot Mundy called *Dune* can lay reviewers and readers in fits of adulation?

Under these conditions SF does not need more recognition from the 'establishment' but less. It should get what it deserves — more and harder kicks in the pants — until it throws up an intelligent and literate body of work which does not fall apart at the touch of the critical probe.

Budrys and Blish and Aldiss have it in them to gain worthwhile recognition, but too much other promise has caved in to the demands of the magazine trade. Heinlein has become a mumbling rebel with nothing much to rebel against and an armoury of outworn philosophy and jingoism as his weapons; Anderson has given up the struggle to be a writer and is satisfied to

turn out saleable yarns wherein good ideas are wasted on *Boy's Own Paper* stories; Judith Merrill is writing high flown unintelligibilities in the attempt to prove that what she selects as readable is art, whereas she would prove a great deal more by writing another *Project Nursemaid*; Pohl's highly individual method has degenerated into a tiresome habit.

And the reviewers, God bless 'em, are taking Ballard terribly seriously. So is Ballard. It's about time that gent ceased giving displays of style and started in to write some stories, as distinct from word pictures with doubtful application to anything except the inside of his own mind. 'The Sound Sweep' showed that he can do it, so why the devil doesn't he? Probably because the readers are contented to be bemused by him as he is.

Better SF will be written when the readers demand

it, but the readers won't demand it while they are contented with a purely emotional evaluation of their reading material. The majority have yet to learn that the real pleasure of literature begins on the day you stop using it as a drug.

I have nothing against escapism — it is a necessary activity — but the manner of the escape is important. If the magazines are to be taken as the measure of the average SF reader's escape, then the flight is only into daydream and fantasy. He has not discovered that the thinking reader escapes into wider realms than science fiction ever dreamed of.

— George Turner, *Australian Science Fiction Review*, (first series), June 1967

GEORGE'S MOST IMPORTANT CRITICAL ARTICLE:

On writing about science fiction

1. Why bother?

John Foyster has recently published his opinion that the reviewing of SF books in fanzines serves little purpose because the reviews appear far too long after the books themselves; and he has some right on his side. The flogging of dead horses is certainly unproductive. Nonetheless, fans will continue to write reviews and, I hope, *ASFR* will continue to publish them. The review is the beginning — small and inconsequential, but still useful — of discussion and ultimately of informed criticism.

The tone of many letters in fanzines suggests that fans resent criticism — that they prefer their likes and dislikes inviolate and regard disagreement as an intrusion on their right to undisturbed enjoyment. An afternoon at the Easter Conference out in the wilds of Boronia reassured my opinion that this is not really so. Here science fiction was discussed knowledgeably and sometimes with insight; and it is interesting that a number of speakers who deprecated the idea of taking SF too seriously proceeded to take it very seriously indeed. And so they should. One's pleasures *should* be taken seriously. The more you understand the things that appeal to you, the wider and greater pleasures open up before you. Mere acceptance of enjoyment leads to surfeit; the pursuit of the roots of pleasure can offer relaxation and enjoyment for a lifetime.

One of the simplest methods of such pursuit is discussion, but in verbal discussion there is too much diversion and spur-of-the-moment argument and one is apt to retain only a general impression of disagreement and perhaps one or two striking points. One's own ideas rarely become clarified under these conditions, except on relatively simple points.

A better method is to write down what you think — and then try to justify what you have written. And then write down what you *really* think. The written word stares back at you, unaffected by your emotional involvement; your only recourse is to erase it and begin again. If you persist, you are likely to evolve a statement very different from the attitude of mind you started out with, because you have begun to think with your brain instead of with your emotions. You will have written something useful because it is true as far as your knowledge can encompass truth, and it may be in complete opposition to what you thought was your opinion. You will have done something good for yourself, and possibly for others. You will have added a little more to what is known and thought.

So by all means write about science fiction. In the dear dead days of *Amazing* and Gernsback, fans *changed* SF by writing about its weaknesses and possibilities. It can happen again; SF is still only a literary youngster, with development before him.

So write reviews, and write them honestly. It is a beginning. *But* remember that praise and blame do not constitute criticism. They are statements of personal opinion, and worthless. The reasoning and justification are what matters. Much good work has waited too long for lack of informed understanding; much valueless work has persisted too long on the wave of thoughtless praise. (One could do a joyous article on the nitwittery of Hugo voters.)

In fact, if you are going to write about SF (or, for that matter, any kind of literature), there are some basic principles to be observed. They are neither many nor unduly restrictive, but they are essential.

The single greatest weakness in present writing about SF is a lack of discipline, with the result that ideas are

presented with irritating fuzziness, statements make it difficult to decide where emotion leaves off and thought begins, and far too much wordage is expended on detail while the large issues are scamped. This lack springs not from an unwillingness on the part of the writers to give of their best, but from a lack of realisation that critical writing is a craft and not just something that anyone can toss off when he has an opinion to spare.

The amount of careful thought and expression encountered at Boronia was enough to convince this visitor that *ASFR* could become a force and an authority in SF if its contributors settled down to the business of genuine critical writing.

These notes, then, are designed to indicate the basis of such writing, and to show that it is in essence a fairly simple thing, not the preserve of aesthetes and super-intellects.

They will treat first of **reviewing**, which is the rock-bottom basis of criticism and a valuable discipline in itself; then with the **theme article**, which is a freer and more rewarding product; and finally with **criticism**, wherein we will swim in much deeper waters.

It should not be assumed that these notes are presented as being finally authoritative, nor that they are definitive in the sense of saying the last word. Whole libraries have been written on the subject, and even blood spilt in the argument. Treat them as an outline of the craft. The individual will soon find his own style and manner of using the tools of the trade.

2. Reviewing

Reviewing must be honest and fair. Writers suffer bitterly from the arrogance of reviewers who are more interested in producing a striking article than a just summation of the work under notice. A favourite method is to concentrate on one aspect of the work and write the review as if this were the only notable thing about the book. This is dishonest, unfair to the writer, misleading to the reader, and all too common in reviewing. Another ploy is to choose a good book and seek industriously to prove that it is a bad book, so that the readers will cheer the analytical acuteness of the reviewer and agree that he is a very cunning and amusing man. The writer, poor devil, can only sweat in silence; if he talks back he will be accused of being unable to accept criticism.

Here are the ingredients of a good review:

A. The prime purpose of a review is to present a description of the work under notice, so that the reader may have some advance idea of whether it will interest him or not. The review which does not do this does nothing. 'Description' does not necessarily mean a run-down of the plot (which may do the author an active disservice: most plots sound dull or silly when presented in outline), though this may be done briefly and with discretion. Description should include a clear statement of what appears to be the central theme of the work (and you may be surprised to discover how far two people can differ about this), a note of the type of work it is (e.g. adventure, hard science, fantasy, satire, juvenile) and a careful appreciation of how well it succeeds or how badly it fails in what it sets out to do. For this last you



must present the hard facts to back your decision. Then should come any outstanding aspect such as characterisation, background detail, literary quality (if you are lucky), extrapolative ingenuity, scientific validity and so on. Given so much, your reader has a chance to decide whether the book is his meat or not. If you are uncertain of the writer's intention, say so; you may be dealing with a controversial work which requires discussion and argument of the reader; don't simply adopt a point of view and hammer it, for this is not fair play and you may regret it later when your ideas have clarified with the passage of time.

B. A review should be based on what the book attempts and how it succeeds or fails. Is it a *competent* adventure or an *inept* fantasy? (Note that the words *good* and *bad* are avoided in this context; you should be dealing with demonstrable facts.) Here we have John Bangsund's beloved double standard, and here its existence is justified; in fact one needs a standard for each type of work. The question for the reader of adventures is how does it measure up to the general standard of adventures, not how does it compare with a comedy of manners, for example. Placement on the literary ladder is a task for the critic, not the reviewer. One would not review *Last and First Men* on the same basis as *A Princess of Mars*. Under such treatment poor Dejah Thoris would simply lay her last egg and expire; alternatively, the Stapledon work would have to be dismissed as plotless, wordy and lacking love interest. (This makes it easy for the reviewer. The critic, with the whole body of literature threatening his judgment, has no such enviable task — and no multiple standard to help him out.) Whichever niche the book fills, the general method of review remains the same. If the suggestions in the preceding paragraph are followed, your reader will know fairly surely whether he wants the book or not, because you will have told him that one is a vast extrapolative work dealing with the progress of the human soul in its quest

for God, demanding concentration and an open mind, while the other is a cloak-and-dagger shenanigans demanding little beyond the willing suspension of disbelief and an imperviousness to sloppy prose.

C. Whether you personally like or dislike the work is not of prime importance. This is not to say that your opinion is unimportant; only that it must not be offered as a reason for reading or not reading the book. Your business is to display the wares, not to push or pan them at the whim of personal taste. You may get a hell of a kick out of every word of Heinlein, but that does not mean that all his books are equally good (even if he has a roomful of Hugos). You may find Frank Herbert a howling bore (as I sometimes do), but you must recognise his solid qualities, which are many. You are writing for all readers of SF, not crusading on behalf of your own prejudices and enthusiasms.

D. Nevertheless, your personal reaction will appear, though it must not be used to set the tone of the article, which should be judicial and balanced. This is an argument against those who have suggested that a review should begin with 'I like/dislike this book because . . .' The printed word is too influential to use so roughly. When you do this you set the tone of the review for or against, and the reader's opportunity for judgment is withheld. Your personal reaction will appear later in the review, when you decide whether the plus values outweigh the minus or vice versa, but it should be made clear that it is a personal reaction. The dyed-in-the-wool Smith fan will not be influenced by your angry decision that *Skylark Duquesne* is a barrage of quintessential bull, but the newcomer to SF who has heard of the Smith mystique and is considering trying one or two of his books deserves better than an unqualified blackball. Also, if you review consistently, your likes and dislikes will become known and readers will have an extra guide to their choice. They will know how dependable you are, and whether or not your choices habitually coincide with theirs. When this happens you will have arrived.

E. Be careful with quotation. Quoting from the text is considered a must among magazine reviewers, and editors are inclined to insist on it. I don't know why, and feel it is a problematic procedure and one that can be grossly unfair to a book. To quote in order to illustrate a point is fair enough, but remember that when you quote out of context you remove the words from their surrounding atmosphere¹. The passage of magnificent prose which you quote may seem inflated and pretentious when lifted away from the psychological build-up which preceded it, and your gleeful example of bad grammar may have been put there to gain an effect which your once-over-quickly reading has failed to detect. However, bad work should be castigated and examples may be given. Just take care when selecting. (And having done this, check your own prose. Twice.)

F. Don't go nit picking. Every work has faults, and the minor faults may be ignored. Bad grammar, for instance, is a major fault if it persists throughout the book, but the occasional lapse is not worth your notice. If the odd lapse is a real howler you can perhaps give it a gleeful line, but don't emphasise it too much. A useful test question is: 'Does this particular fault distract my attention and spoil the general effect of the book?' If it does not, ignore it. Most of the book's readers will do just that. The question of scientific validity is less simple. If a whole story is based on a misconception or false data, tear it apart by all means, but don't be too hard on the occasional lapse which does not greatly affect the general validity of the story. At a later stage the critic will consider these things in relation to the writer's work as a whole, but the reviewer is concerned only with the book he has just read.

G. Don't attempt criticism in the space of a review. You cannot say anything useful about ultimate values in the space of a few hundred words and still provide the information which is the purpose of your review. The art of criticism involves reading and re-reading, comparison with other works, decisions concerning manner and matter, consideration of values literary and psychological and philosophic, extended quotation and endless investigation of purpose and meaning. Not only can it not be done in a few sentences, but it cannot be done at all after a single reading unless it is a very simple book indeed. Even such a vulgarity as a Retief story could not be adequately criticised without consideration of the whole body of Laumer's work.

Having done all this conscientiously, what will you have achieved?

Well, you will for once have looked straight at a book with all personal bias removed as far as is psychologically possible. If you do this consistently your entire attitude to fiction is likely to change — for the better. You will become aware of subtleties and requirements which a writer has sweated over and which you perhaps have in the past dismissed as decoration or incompetence. And your pleasure in reading will gain new dimensions.

But, the writer may well protest, I want to do more than this: I have ideas and arguments to offer, insights to make known and refutations to put forward.

And rightly so. But for these there is another type of article, requiring a different technique. I call it the Theme Article, or perhaps the Contemplative Review, for it stands somewhere in the great gap between reviewing and criticism and has no true generic name. It belongs, joyfully, in the cut-and-thrust arena of polemic and outright literary warfare.

But the review is the basic work, the discipline which forces the writer to look straight at a work for what it actually is. Who has learned to do that is ready for creative work, for even minor criticism is creative, and I suppose the Theme Article can be thought of as minor criticism. Accent on minor.

1 Footnote by JB: 'A text out of context is a pretext.' Alexander Campbell said it, but I forget what he was referring to.

And minor critics have a habit of developing into good writers. Why? Because their training teaches them the basic fact of all effective communication of reality: See what is there. Then describe it.

Interlude

At this point the reader is entitled to ask for proof of the pudding, to say 'Put up or shut up. Show some samples.' If this is meant to say that the samples must be the author's own, the challenge is not a fair one, since if it were to be applied consistently practically no-one would be entitled to do critical writing of any kind — except published writers, and they are, for many reasons, apt to be unreliable as critics of their own field, though good enough when surveying work which has no competitive personal interest for them.

I could refer you to a dozen books of essays which apply this system entertainingly as well as precisely, but in this case I am able to refer to some reviews of my own, which have been written strictly within the limits set out above. The books concerned are *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, *The Revolving Boy* and *Lord of Light*.

The Revolving Boy, being a straightforward novel, required only a straightforward treatment.

Yesterday's Tomorrows, however, posed a problem because of its complexity. Being non-fiction, it contained much more meat than a novel can hope to encompass, and being in my opinion an important book (in regard to SF) it could not be simply forced into the mould. The mould, however, is flexible and can be expanded sufficiently to hold a book like this in fair perspective. My solution was to devote a major part of the review to an outline of the content of the work (a formidable task, believe me) and to sneak in all other relevant matters as opportunity offered. I have yet to meet with a book which will not respond to this formula for reviewing if the writer gives proper consideration to his task and makes full use of the opportunities to rearrange the essentials and give prominence where it is due.

Lord of Light posed a more irritating problem, in that it was plain that the author had attempted something which he had not achieved, but in the attempt had achieved something else of importance. The problem here was to decide on the general category of the book and hence on the standard against which it should be judged. (One can never be too didactic about this; most novels embody aspects of several categories.) Other reviewers might choose other standards than the romantic adventure, which was the aspect which brought forth the most definite response in me, and might be forced to damn it utterly whereas I perhaps gave it a better review than it deserves. And yet it gives pleasure. So you can see that there are problems, and by no means small ones, even with an apparently cut-and-dried system. The thing is that what I have propounded is not a system, but a set of limits within which to work; these limits can be pulled in or pushed out at will.

There was another pleasure in doing this particular review, in that it allowed me to demonstrate my personal method with regard to SF reviewing. This is a determination to discover and present what is *good* in a given work, and balance it against what is bad; I feel that only in this way can one be fair both to those who will like

the book and those who will not. Where I can find no worthwhile virtues I do not propose to waste JB's space and your time on the thing. A bad work is only worth notice in a larger context, as an aspect of some theme covered in a wider discussion.

Which returns us to the Theme Article.

3. The Theme Article

This is much more difficult to describe and define than the Review, since it is so much less restricted and can cover so much more ground. In the Theme Article the writer can let his head go, so long as he observes (as always) a few basic requirements. These are broadly the requirements of any good essay, and may be summarised thus:

- A State your theme clearly and given an indication of how you intend to approach it. This saves you endless asides to the reader in the course of the work.
- B Lay out your arguments without frills. Justify each one of them (by quotation, logic, deduction or whatever method suits) before passing on to the next.
- C Don't use digression unless it is relevant. Even then be judicious in the use of it, and don't forget to relate it back to the main line of argument. If you don't, your readers will be puzzled and probably bored.
- D At the end, summarise and present your conclusions briefly.

Plenty of other things matter, such as style, construction, mood and a dozen more, but this is not a treatise on the use of techniques. Good plain prose on the above lines will give a workmanlike job on most subjects. Your own personality will show through as you grow more adept and learn to break the rules with safety — by substituting for them another set of rules, not flinging them overboard. This has ever been the problem of the rebel — to find something to replace the object of his rebellion.

Broadly speaking, the Theme Article deals with a specific section or group of sections of its subject. It attempts to track down elusive meanings, reveal unsuspected relationships, summarise complex and sometimes apparently unrelated works, or refute the conclusions of other writers. It may do much more. It can do anything you wish it to — if you know your subject, which is the first requirement. You can't write an article on the basis of an opinion and hope to contribute to the pleasure or understanding of others. Reason counts. Opinion counts only after it has been justified.

(Digression: A Theme Article is not just a longer Review. Reviews are for new works. The Theme Article is for reappraisal of works already known, or for investigation of their impact and importance and relationship to the business of being alive. A common practice is for a reviewer to review a book and then expand his comments into a Theme Article. This is a bit unfair to the book, which becomes saddled in the reader's mind with all the faults laid at the doors of a dozen other related books mentioned in the text. It can be done fairly, but rarely is.)

The article may be about a particular book or story, or (more commonly) about a group of works related by the writer's prime subject. Or it may be about an author or group of authors. Or an aspect of SF. Or the policy of a magazine as shown by its contents. Or a scientific or sociological idea current in the genre. Or anything at all which is germane to the policy of the magazine you are writing for.

Here is a list of titles (self-explanatory, I hope) which could head articles of genuine interest to SF fans, together with subtitles indicating the possible range of such articles:

- **The Decline and Decay of Robert A. Heinlein.** The history of a descent from clarity to muddled thinking. Works cited: 'The Green Hills of Earth', 'By His Bootstraps', 'The Roads Must Roll', *Orphans of the Sky*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Glory Road*, *Farnham's Freehold*.
- **R. F. Starzl as the Progenitor of Stanley Weinbaum.** A comparison of their works, with some notes doubting the claims of some others regarded as 'originals'.
- **Why Is H. G. Wells Still With Us?** An enquiry into the continuing viability of the Wells canon as against the ephemerality of so much modern science fiction.
- **Towards a Definition of Science Fiction.** Notes towards the drawing of a useful line between SF and fantasy.
- **The SF Critics and Their Blind Spots.** A summation of the critical attitudes of Judith Merrill, Damon Knight, Algis Budrys, P. Schuyler Miller and others, with some remarks on the pitfalls of adopted attitudes.
- **The Ruthless Editors.** The mutilation of manuscripts and the subjection of quality to policy.
- **Frank Herbert and the Intellectual Approach.** Or, Why choke the baby with an excess of bathwater?
- **An Anatomy of the Analog Story.** What Campbell has built and what he has destroyed.
- **The Role of Character in SF.** An answer to the critic who said it could be a disadvantage.

The point about all of these suggested themes is that they could only be dealt with by referring to a broad range of SF novels and stories, common themes and accepted conventions. The value to be obtained from each would be not so much in the summation of individual problems (which, after all, only provide the pegs on which to hang the discussion) as in the side issues, the revelations of individual thinking, the oddments of special information, the production of unexpected relationships which inevitably distinguish this type of work. (The writer's bonus is that by the time he has finished the article he knows much more about his own thinking than he did when he started — and much more about SF, because he has applied his brain to it instead of his emotions.)

In any one of these suggested articles the writer could fire off a whole Guy Fawkes Night of explosive ideas and conceptions. If the titles seem to indicate a limited sphere of action, the attempt to write one of them — any one — would touch off huge areas for exploration and investigation. In fact, these titles have been deliberately chosen because it would be possible, within the

bounds cited, to present through them an almost complete summation of the aims, ideals, history and future possibilities of SF. I don't suggest that anyone should try it on this basis, though no great ingenuity would be required; I put it in only to emphasise that in the Theme Article you can range at will — so long as your ranging is relevant to the stated subject.

The Theme Article has far more value than the Review. The Review does a simple service; the Theme Article is the blood and bones of discussion, dissension and the propagation of ideas.

It is also the blood and bones of literary criticism, the accumulation of skeleton and flesh which one day presents itself to its startled creator as a complete and integrated body of ideas, a definitive work on a subject close to his heart.

4. Criticism

About the art of criticism there is little that can profitably be written here. None of us is likely to attempt it in the near future, for it is a lifetime occupation, laced with determination, love and tears.

It is fashionable to regard professional critics as cloudborne academics whose findings bear no relation to the realities of the subjects of which they treat. This is both ignorant and unfair. Without the critics, who tirelessly chart the paths of the endeavours of others, those paths would long ago have wound into the morasses and dead ends of confusion and stasis.

Would surgery exist if some form of anatomy had not preceded it? Would it continue to advance if anatomy and microscopy were not forever enlarging its boundaries of effort? Well, the critic is the anatomist and microscopist of literature. He searches and prods down to the last word of text, the final idiosyncrasy of idiom, and even spelling, to wrest out the secrets of meaning and construction. The writer, who is by and large an intuitive workman, rarely knows the facts of his own production. It is the critic who at length tells him what he has done and even, sometimes, how he has managed to do it. And it is the critic who resolves the puzzles and problems of the reader, who likes such and such a book, but 'just doesn't get the idea' of this or that passage. It is the critic who watches trends of social movement and philosophic thinking and rescues appropriate works from oblivion at the moment when their impact will at last be made; who scratches over the rubbish heaps of forgotten books and every so often waves one in our faces, crying 'Look what you missed, boys!'

A Voyage to Arcturus was published at the wrong time. It failed. 1920 was the wrong climate for it. Reissued in 1963, it is still in print, and five years is a long time for any but a very good book indeed (or a bad but popular one, which is something else). It was not rediscovered by an SF fan but by a thoughtful critic who realised what he had and persuaded Gollancz to give it a further try. (They did, and made it the cornerstone of a whole series of fantasies of three and four decades ago. Pity. They didn't understand that because one book is good, others in the genre need not be. They weren't.)

But it is not my business to justify the critic's existence. The artist knows the value of the man, and his opinion is, in this case, the only one that matters,

because criticism, informed and dedicated, is the touchstone of his endeavour and the compass of his uncertain paths.

It is not likely that high-powered criticism could be of much value to SF. The genre has not yet produced more than half a dozen works worth so much expenditure of effort. Even Wells, in toto, is not considered of much critical importance.

Criticism is, in fact, not for the general reader. It is highly technical work, written for people deeply versed in the subjects treated. (Would you read a chemistry treatise for entertainment?) Criticism requires extensive knowledge of literary techniques, language and languages, philosophy, history, psychology and a sufficient smattering of *all* really important subjects to be able to bone up on them at a moment's notice.

Don't try it yet awhile. I'm damned sure I won't. But we can all paddle happily in the Theme Article for the rest of our lives and still not have rippled more than the surface of SF.

Appendix: Some SF Reviewers

Since I have insisted on a differences between the functions of 'critic' and 'reviewer', it may be as well to categorise the work of some current critical writers on the three groups I have presented. As with the whole essay, nothing here is offered as being definitive, but my practical examples of who-fits-where may make clearer what is meant by the terms as I have used them.

To start at the top *criticism* has been a rarity in SF. Kingsley Amis's *New Maps of Hell* is the only volume I have read which deserves that description, though there may well be others. It is an attempt to see SF as a genre, to discover where it is going, what it does best, what purposes it serves and what purposes it might serve. One is not required to agree with Amis's conclusions, but the depth and incisiveness of his understanding cannot be ignored. This is a major attempt to detect and demonstrate definition, philosophy and aesthetic.

On another plane, Jack Williamson's study of H. G. Wells, published in *Riverside Quarterly*, must also be admitted as criticism. Written as a degree thesis, it is an earnest estimate of Wells's earlier works, including most of the SF. Unfortunately it is unoriginal, pedantic and dull — the sort of thing which frightens readers away from criticism.

Such articles as Brian Aldiss's 'Judgment at Jonbar' (*SF Horizons*, Spring 1964) may in some quarters be classified as criticism. This one is a lengthy (10,000 words or so) appreciation of Williamson's *The Legion of*

Time, used as a basis for a plea for better critical standards in SF. (Rightly so; Aldiss's attempts to discover virtues in the thing cannot hide its grisly cheapness. One bright idea doesn't justify a bad novel.) To the uncritical it may appear profound and scholarly, but it is in fact a pretty slick *theme article*, entertainingly written but superficial in approach. Don't imagine I decry the article: it is a very good one. Such items are needed, and Aldiss knew precisely what he was doing when he wrote it. I only point out that this is not work of the depth required of criticism. But it could, as part of a large body of work composed of such articles, eventually form an integral section of a truly critical structure of a much broader scope. In itself it is no more literary criticism than a finger is a whole hand. But if we are to develop critics, Aldiss may well become one of them.

Of the magazine columnists only P. Schuyler Miller is a true *reviewer*, the only one who concentrates on the work in hand and doesn't seek to write crafty articles to celebrate the knowingness and insight of Miller. You may doubt his value judgments, which are sometimes peculiar, but every reviewer has his blind spots which the reader has to learn for himself. (I instance his relish for inflated prose, which he describes as 'poetic', and his curious veneration for Andre Norton's untidy habit of leaving loose ends all over her novels.) But once you recognise these things you can read between the Miller lines and get a sound idea of the work under review.

The rest, from the revered Knight onwards, all write moody theme articles disguised as reviews, and the books inevitably come off second best, even when they praise them. One feels that these reviewers keep one eye firmly fixed on some future collection of their critical gems, and that the writer and book under notice are less considered than the reviewer and his immortal reputation.

Knight and Blish have published collections of their reviews and essays, but in neither case have I found it possible to extract a critical philosophy. Knight is too interested in whooping after hares to bring down any real deer. Blish, despite moments of real insight, seems uncomfortably concerned with the world in relation to James Blish rather than the reverse. Both write good articles in general, and sometimes write them extremely well, but they are neither critics nor true reviewers.

Moskowitz perhaps deserves a mention for sheer persistence and volume of published nonsense, including some pretty cheap scandal disguised as 'SF history'. Well, that's his mention.

A good standard of reviewing may yet be the contribution of the fan magazines.

THE REVIEWS

W. H. G. Armytage: *Yesterday's Tomorrows*
Routledge & Kegan Paul: 35s0d/A\$5.60

This book is subtitled 'A Historical Survey of Future Societies', which is, I suppose, a fair description; but it is much more than that. It is a history, stunningly docu-

mented, of man's attempts to determine the direction of his own future, from the days of priestly prophecy to the contemporary use of technical groups armed with the weapons of mathematics, psychology, games theory and that whole intellectual and physical gimmickry which allows man to eavesdrop on the secrets of his own

behaviour.

Science fiction rears its anything but bug-eyed head very early in the piece, occupies an honoured position throughout most of the survey (which runs to more than 90,000 words) and is edged out only in the last chapter, wherein real science takes over the running with a vengeance.

That *Yesterday's Tomorrows* contains a pretty good outline of the development of SF is incidental, a bonus which happens to be necessary to the theme because the SF writers and their progenitors have played a major role in documenting man's attempts to read the future. This bonus may prove to be the main attraction for some readers, though the hard-core thesis is never really hard and the only doubtful moments seem to be the fruit of faulty proof-reading. Professor Armytage has, in fact, the gift of presenting the complex in graspable form and of never allowing the reader to become entangled by the many threads of the survey, which of necessity ranges backwards and forwards in time and space in the formative sections. He is Professor of Education and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at Sheffield University and has published two other books on the utopian theme, one a study of actual utopian experiments (*Heavens Below*, 1962), the other of technological prophecies (*The Rise of the Technocrats*, 1965); so he is no beginner in the subject.

This reviewer simply has not the erudition to judge the reliability of many of the Professor's statements, but sees little ground for doubt, and has enough general knowledge to be reasonably sure that the main argument is sound. Even if it should prove less than perfect, this book will still delight as a grab bag of oddities for the bibliophile and the collector of outré information.

There are many detectable errors of description and ascription which the SF addict will leap upon — the introduction of slans credited to Van Vogt's *Destination Universe*, *Galaxy* cited as an earlier title of *Worlds of If*, *Science Wonder Stories* confused with *Amazing Stories* — but none of them appears to affect the validity of the thesis, in which magazine SF plays only a very minor role. In general the work bears evidence of a daunting thoroughness of research.

The mass of information is vast, and summary can offer only the barest outline; ideas worth a whole article slip by in a couple of sentences.

The book progresses steadily from nonsense to science, as promised in the preface:

The rise of these 'conflict models' of prediction out of what might otherwise be regarded as futuristic fantasies is the theme of this book.

Armytage begins with the Hebrew prophets, with their prophecies of national glory counterpointed by denunciation of private abuses. (SF now uses the abuses as rather sickening pointers to the future.) He moves swiftly through the Greek oracles and the Roman books of the Cumaean Sybil, gives a quick nod in the direction of Plato searching out ideals — and suddenly, on page 14, we are at the birth of SF:

Bacon considered the fable was a method commended for science . . . In other words, inventions

which men were not ready for, could be set forth in fables.

Bacon, though he produced his own utopia in *The New Atlantis*, probably derived the method from More's *Utopia* (1516). Previous fabulists, such as Lucian with his Moon journey, had not been concerned with science or speculation, only with a fantastic setting which would permit outrages of satires; they were not science fictionists. More and Bacon were, in essence if not in intention.

They, like most of their immediate successors (Armytage reports 875 such literary items by the year 1800), were concerned with law, religion and politics rather than with technological science, though the aeroplane and the submarine popped up insistently and Baron Münchhausen's 'biographers' postulated something like a tape-recorded book. These works were not intended as prediction but as serious consideration of the ideal human condition. Man's ambitions were not yet technologically centred. But prediction was an obvious next step and by the nineteenth century it was flourishing — in France.

Camille Flammarion's *Fin du monde* is well enough known; sociologist Gabriel Tard's *Fragment d'histoire future* and novelist Anatole France's *Pierre Blanc* (set in 2270 AD) are less well known, and Armytage quotes from at least six other Gallic forecasters busy with their crystal balls. They were not adding much to the genre or to genuine soundings of the future, but earlier, in the eighteenth century, a new voice had sounded. The Marquis de Condorcet had remarked:

All that is necessary, to reduce the whole of nature to laws similar to those which Newton discovered with the aid of the calculus, is to have a sufficient number of observations and a mathematics that is complex enough.

The way was being prepared for investigation on a tougher than fictional scale.

In the nineteenth century a whole constellation of events pushed prognostication violently ahead and changed its nature. Steam power ushered in the age of technology, the industrial revolution took place, the principles of socialism and communism became widely disseminated and Jules Verne became the father of technological SF. And this last was not the least of these happenings in its effect on prediction.

In 1857 James Clerk Maxwell applied the calculus of probabilities not to card games and elections but to matter in motion — all kinds of matter in all kinds of motion. Mathematician Laplace thought this might lead to 'social physics'. It didn't, but the idea is not dead, and SF still plays with it uneasily. From this to the idea of actually manipulating the future was a quick move. Malthus's *Essay on the Principles of Population* supplied some ideas for Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which in turn inspired in Francis Galton the dream of a eugenically controlled society — as Armytage remarks, 'the arrival rather than the survival of the fittest'.

The day of the grim utopias was upon us. The Malthusian nightmare is a dark thread through all the SF of the period (there was a huge amount of it, including, staggeringly, a novel by Anthony Trollope), and

after Jules Verne the machine age furnished the further nightmare of man ground under the iron heel of his own creation — hence Jack London's *The Iron Heel*.

It is tempting here to plunge into the store of rare and forgotten novels by surprising people which Armytage unearthed in his research, but space forbids. (To me the book is worth having just for these references and the fascinating quotations from many of them.) As yet the scientists had not moved in and the novelists held the field. Bellamy's famous *Looking Backward* held it for many years, being probably the most successful SF ever written — it outsold *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Then H. G. Wells arrived on the scene, trailing a herd of imitators, and by 1910 nearly all the major themes of SF had been stated and examined more thoroughly than the modern reader might credit. By the time magazine SF arrived there was little to do but embellish the past and rediscover lost themes. SF, though immensely popular, was in the doldrums; new directions were needed. At this point SF begins to retreat from the foreground of the book, its major duty (popularisation) soundly done. It seems to this reviewer that the new directions are being cautiously explored, but Professor Armytage is not concerned with this — he is a historian, not a literary critic (though there is a close connection between the two).

Utopias as such were now to be examined rather than merely postulated, and the scientists, philosophers and mainstream novelists (I wish we could get rid of that silly term) were to move *en masse* into the field, rather than remain lone and scattered voices.

So we had, in the early twentieth century, a 'superman' period, nourished by the German sensational novelists looking over their shoulders to Nietzsche, and in England by Wells, D. H. Lawrence, Shaw and (surprise?) W. B. Yeats. There followed a reaction against the superman and mechanisation — Kipling and Chesterton were doughty dissenters — and the protest reached its peak with Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World* and *Ape and Essence*) and Robert Graves (*Seven Days in New Crete*).

While the English were reacting against the violent utopias, the Americans were still pushing the dream of a technological future. The SF magazines spawned; industry plunged into the era of the gimmick. Popular culture was, as usual, a generation behind the intellectuals. Simultaneously the Russians put politics into SF, which was to be expected of a society where *all* activity is regarded as political. And the British, via Olaf Stapledon, C. S. Lewis, J. B. S. Haldane and Bertrand Russell, demonstrated religious argument as essential to any understanding of tomorrow and lifted the argument out of SF into the realm of predictive philosophy. (Stapledon and Lewis were not writing genre SF, whatever the fans feel about them; they were creating philosophic fables, using a loose fictional form in order to reach a mass audience. Back to Bacon and More!)

All the ingredients were there save one. The atom bomb provided it. Absolute prediction had become essential.

At last the American materialist outlook and the European humanist argument joined in the effort to really discover the future rather than theorise about it.

The second last chapter deals with 'Surmising

Forums' — specialist groups whose business is to sort what *will* happen from the infinity of 'might happen'. Their progenitor may be visualised as the British Royal Commission on Coal early this century — a board of experts detailed to survey resources, advise on usage and predict the exhaustion point.

What develops here I do not propose to tell: it would be tantamount to revealing the solution of a thriller. Suffice it that this chapter and the next, 'Operational Eschatologies', are as far in advance of SF ideas as SF is in advance of popular science. They deal with things that are actually happening. They contain little that one is not at least marginally aware of, but they juxtapose ideas and factual effort in a fashion which dramatises man's relation to tomorrow with the kind of force every novelist dreams of attaining just once in his career.

Professor Armytage makes no comments, draws no conclusions; he might well object to my outline on the ground that a reviewer with a different cast of mind would perceive a radically different structure in his book. But he gives few clues, only indicates the signposts; you follow and find out for yourself, do your own interpreting.

This is a basic textbook for the science fictionist, be he simply a romantic seeking the lost sense of wonder (it is here), a completist seeking knowledge of the SF past (it is here) or a thinker deeply concerned with the trends and directions of his civilisation (the clues are here). And every SF *writer* should regard the final chapters, especially the last, as required reading, for here are revealed areas in which SF thinking lags far behind scientific and philosophic thinking.

This is an exciting book; it gives something of a cold douche to reflect that it won't be everybody's meat and that some may even find it difficult or dull. I can only recommend it. I haven't read an SF novel to equal it in interest since *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

And if the final prognostications are rarely reassuring, there is this comforting epigram from sociologist Arnold Green to allow a little hope amid the impending gloom:

The chattering of one's teeth is often mistaken for the approaching hoofbeats of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

I hope he is right. Indeed I do.

Gertrude Friedberg: *The Revolving Boy*

Ace Special: US60c A70c

This would appear to be Mrs Friedberg's first SF novel, and a highly successful venture it is. Without being a mind bender or world shaker, *The Revolving Boy* has charm, originality, competence and, in its later stages, the carefully constructed suspense which only professionalism can achieve — and then not too damned often, alas.

The story concerns a boy with a sense of absolute direction, a boy who always knows where he is, even in absolute darkness. Like a compass, his metabolism is orientated in one specific direction, which he is drawn to face automatically, and when he turns away from it he has to make a compensatory opposite turn in order

to achieve physical comfort. He has to compensate not only for the normal divagations of everyday life, but for the movement of the earth in space and of the solar system in space, and for every cosmic change which alters his orientation to a mysterious something lying somewhere in the specific direction to which he is orientated. Fortunately for his sanity (also for that of the reader and the author) he does not have to compute these compensations, but makes them automatically.

Mrs Friedberg defends this conception by an interestingly stated comparison with the perfect pitch so highly prized by musicians; she could, I think, have used migratory birds also, but did not. Thank heaven she does not take the incompetent plotter's way out — label it esp and toss realism overboard; her boy's talent has a physical basis.

The first half of the book establishes the nature of this talent, with its peculiarities and disadvantages, and has the easy charm which so many women can give to stories about children. It develops that young Derv's talent is connected with the fact of his having been born in weightless condition in space, and that his basic orientation is due to a signal emanating from the direction which he naturally faces when at rest. For reasons psychological, emotional and practical these things are best concealed, but eventually truth emerges and a team of scientists monitor the signal in order to discover whether or not it is produced by intelligent entities. There is no way of telling. The project becomes a background matter in the institute involved, with observations made from time to time just to make sure the signals still exist. Derv grows up and moves from the area, and changes his name to avoid awkwardnesses of one kind and another. The signals keep coming, but the project is routine; nobody is devoted to it any longer. Then, sixteen years later, Derv becomes physically and psychically ill, and disorientated: the signals have stopped. His wife's efforts to help coincide with a resurgence of interest in the institute, and it is suddenly necessary to find Derv again to make tests. But Derv, threatened with an exploratory operation, has left the hospital and vanished. The rest of the tale is no more than a breathless piece of suspense fiction leading to the location of Derv and the solution of the problems connected with the signals.

Nobody saves the world because nobody needs to. Politics and vast organisations do not move across the scene, because Mrs Friedberg has written a novel about a handful of people with a problem. The aliens sending the signal do not make a dramatic appearance at the end because their presence would be just an obstruction to good story telling; and the way Mrs Friedberg writes her tale, we couldn't care less whether the aliens are sentient vegetables or Barsoomian thoats; they just don't matter. Attention is concentrated on Derv and his personal problems, on the slow and detailed unfolding of his predicament and on sharp little pen-portraits (never deep but always lively enough to catch the attention) of the peripheral characters.

And Mrs Friedberg has one great ace in the hole at all times — she has an original idea. Thus one can never anticipate her plotting, because the idea is hers alone, to date, and only she knows how she is about to handle it from chapter to chapter. It is a restful book, and easy

to read; its prose is at all times adequate, never fancy, and shows a respect for quality and plainness of statement. One hesitates to think of the megalomaniac mess so many writers would have churned out if they had chanced on the same basic idea — or of the manner in which others would have tossed in the gimmick as one of a dozen like it without pausing to examine it for interest and intricacy. Mrs Friedberg really examines her basic idea, lifting it out of the gimmick class and making her book centre solidly upon it.

As a bonus she gives, quietly and unemphatically, a fresh and surprisingly detailed view of everyday life in the near future — the action covers about thirty years from the early seventies — and her ideas about clothing, home construction, decoration, eating and comfort appliances are genuinely original and thoughtful. She treats of these things without emphasis (because they are her characters' mode of life and therefore not obtrusive to them) in quick references here and there. If one cared to go through the book and collect them all, I think there might appear quite a detailed view of one woman's ideas of what we may expect within our lifetime.

I can't imagine *The Revolving Boy* winning any Hugos, but it is a better book, both as literature and SF, than some which have. It is simpler than, say, *Lord of Light*; it attempts less but succeeds better at what it attempts, and is a better book. It may turn out to be forgettable in the long run, but for the moment of reading it has charm and warmth, two qualities cherishable for their rarity.

Roger Zelazny: *Lord of Light*

Faber: UK 21s0d A\$2.75

Lord of Light is excellent entertainment, a repository of novel idea twists, a humdinger of an adventure, and contains a number of more solid features for the serious minded. It shows Zelazny's strength and much of his weakness, but for this reviewer the strength prevails. Some may consider it pretentious or indigestible, but that is the reader's privilege; like it or not, the book has many virtues.

At a vaguely defined time, at least some centuries before the story opens, a space ship lands on a planet light years from Earth and is, presumably, marooned there; at any rate it does not leave. It may even have been a colonising vessel. Its crew are occidentals, many of them scientists of one kind or another, some of them possessing or later developing special talents of the esp variety (including at least one fascinating new one). The passengers must have been Hindus, though this is not explicitly stated.

The scientists establish themselves as leaders, dictators, and eventually as gods. They assume the names, aspects and attributes of the illimitable Hindu pantheon, or such of them as seem useful, build themselves an impregnable Heaven, and rule the world. But to establish man on the planet they first have to conquer the local inhabitants, who are a pretty powerful breed of various physical, non-physical and mixed varieties. The most powerful, the Rakasha, are subdued and cast into a pit and sealed in. So here we have Hell and its demons.

And between these opposites are the 'mortals' — the

unfortunate passengers — who have degenerated under the ungentle guidance of their gods into something like a medieval Hindu culture. They are not permitted technological progress. The gods knock this on the head wherever it appears. Over the centuries the rulers have become literally gods in the minds of the people, and are worshipped in the Hindu fashion. Even the doctrines of karma and dharma are preserved by scientific means. The gods can transfer minds/souls/personalities (have it your own way) into new bodies, and so have themselves lived through the centuries since the advent. They make something of a profitable business of it among the mortals also, and, more importantly, use it to keep the mortals and each other in check. If you don't care for the other bloke's activities, have him reincarnated as a dog or a monkey and so render him harmless; or, if you merely feel spiteful, provide him with a fine physical frame which turns out to be epileptic.

The story is the familiar one of the crew member who disapproves of the cynical and self-seeking rule of the gods and sets out to improve the lot of the mortals by giving them technology. The story, with its self-evident conclusion, is only a string on which to thread a rip-roaring series of ideas and incidents, and it is in these that the fascination of the work lies, as it does in any fantasy.

'Fantasy', I wrote just then, and stopped to think. *Lord of Light* is not easy to classify, for Zelazny provides a scientific, or at least science-fictional, basis for all his miracles; the story is true SF. But the story-telling *method* is pure fantasy and so is the style. And behind these lie a number of ideas and incidents pointing to the possibility that his original intention was to write an anti-religious satire, which became swallowed in the intrigue and high adventure of the fable. With the science we need not concern ourselves. It is of the Van Vogtian type, and its main use is to keep the reader's feet on the ground and remind him that this is a tale of real people, not a variation on the Tolkien mythology or a sword-and-sorcery romance.

The fantasy element is provided by the uninhibited nature of the incidents, the outrageously stylised characterisations (necessary when the characters are gods with definite aspects and attributes) and the artificial but effective style, which I propose to discuss later.

The satirical element crops up every so often, sometimes but not always amusingly. There is some fun to be had with the religious aspects of the introduction of modern plumbing, the prayer wheel considered as a one-armed bandit and the hot line to Heaven. There is something savage in the treatment of Nerriti, the one fanatical Christian remaining among the gods. His followers are zombies, and his fanaticism is such that he has these mindless and soulless things kneel in the imitation of prayer. Even Jonathan Swift could not have been more brutal than that. And the rebel hero, Sam, is much confused in his idealism. He takes on the aspect of the Buddha but is all too ready to fight when things do not move quickly enough to suit him, and each time loses by it. He makes the ancient and heretical mistake of enlisting the powers of Hell as allies, in the delusion that he can deal with them also when the time comes.

Last, but by no means least, though Sam wins his

battle and is acclaimed a liberator, it is in fact Yama, the Lord of Death, the cynical and invincible and allegiance-swapping slayer, who makes his victory possible. Sam's final apotheosis is as Maitreya, the Lord of Light, but it is Yama who has indeed given light to the world. To investigate this too far is to invite some shuddersome conclusions and perhaps shed some peculiar light on Zelazny's mental processes, but this can only be done at a later date when one has achieved some perspective on the book. My present feeling is that much of this is not ideologically intentional but dictated by the necessities of the plot, and that the satirist has been overwhelmed by the story teller.

A good thing, too. Religious satire is twopence a bunch these days but good story tellers are becoming increasingly rare. There are peculiar errors in the story and some irritating lapses in the style, and even some trick prose which is quite effective until you extract the meaning from it, but these things, though they halt you for the moment, are swiftly recovered and the tale goes quite triumphantly on.

Lord of Light won this year's Hugo for best novel. Whether or not it was best novel of 1967 is not important (Hugo winners rarely are), but it deserves recognition as a stylish and competent piece of work. For this reviewer, Zelazny deserves a public cheer and a statuette on the workroom shelf. He has done what so many fans have been howling for someone to do — he has brought back the lost sense of wonder. *Lord of Light* is by no means a foolproof work of art, but it has given me more pleasure than most SF of the past two or three years.

A note on style

Those who feel that criticism of a good work is mere carping are warned not to read any further. Those who care for the art of writing may find something of interest.

Since Zelazny has been widely praised for his style, and has a fistful of Hugos to his credit (one of which made me wonder what had got into the voters), it may not be amiss to see how far he has progressed in what seems to me his best work to date.

'A Rose for Ecclesiastes' was my first encounter with him, and showed a style laboured but worth watching; at that date he was trying too hard and it showed. ('Rose' was good stuff, though.) The novelettes in *Four for Tomorrow* showed that 'Rose' was not just a one-shot success; then came *This Immortal* and my heart sank. Bags of style, yards of ideas, a whole cornucopia of incidents, and at the end of it all a tired old solution that SF should have discarded long since. I thought that perhaps he was a novelettist but not a novelist — it often happens like that. Then 'Damnation Alley' and a couple of other pot-boilers for Frederik Pohl had me weeping that another promising talent had sold out for quick returns. (I have not read the widely praised *The Dream Master*.)

Lord of Light, however, shows a Zelazny well on the way to literary maturity. His mistakes are bad, but his successes are noteworthy and he has obviously attained an easy mastery of his medium; he makes it work for him, and has learned the trick of moving easily from one method to another without showing the seams. In *Lord of Light* he does this last thirty or forty times and nearly

always with smooth success. He has also penetrated to the heart of the fantasy style and avoided the traps which have swallowed so many writers whole.

He uses the style so often and so wrongly described by dazzled readers as 'poetic' because it presents them with pretty pictures and powerful emotional identifications. Merritt and Williamson cut their own throats by making this mistake, and you will find it pretty soupy going if you try now to read *The Moon Pool* or *The Stone from the Green Star*, where words like 'iridescent', 'resplendent' and 'amethystine' spatter the pages like gobs of scented porridge. Lovecraft reached the height of raging boredom by making everything 'inexpressible' or 'indescribable', when it wasn't a 'lurking horror coiled about the shuddering depths of my night-enshrouded soul'.

Zelazny has seen that the fantasy-romance style depends not on 'poetic' language but on a deliberate avoidance of the poetic idiom. He has adopted a dignified and very unambiguous prose, slightly elaborate in syntax but plain in vocabulary, which hits off the medieval nature of his story very well. If occasionally he overdoes it, we are prepared to look the other way for a moment.

Where he fails shockingly badly is, not unexpectedly, in an area where most American writers fail in the fantasy attempt. It seems almost as if they have a defective ear for stylised prose, and commit errors of literary tact which would raise the hair of an English writer. This may well be because the English writer soaks up the old language traditions with the air he breathes; the comparable American tradition is starker and more realistic. As early as page 2, after several hundred words of dignified introductory work, the Lord of Death converses with a man who has been reincarnated as an ape:

'Your prayers and your curses come to the same, Lord Yama', commented the ape. 'That is to say, nothing.'

'It has taken you seventeen incarnations to arrive at this truth?' said Yama. 'I can see then why you are still doing time as an ape.'

That 'doing time' jars just when the spell was taking hold. We are ripped abruptly from medieval India to twentieth-century America, and have to find our way back. The odd idiom in the wrong place is tactless; realism of speech has no place in a style which is fiercely anti-realistic. Yet there are other passages wherein the gods drop their masquerades among themselves and speak with a curious mixture of old and new idioms, as though the habit of ritual has deprived them of facility with natural speech, and these passages are very effective in pointing the different nature of the personal drama from that of the universal drama. It is a pity when this happens, as it too often does, in the wrong place.

And he uses that horrible 'he did' construction which bedevils amateurs trying to imitate archaic forms of speech: 'He did near empty the wine cellar . . .' 'and

then he did make his way . . .' It would be possible to quote about a hundred examples of this usage, which has never existed in that particular form in the English language, except very occasionally as a special syntactical device to effect a focus of attention, or (in second-rate prosodists) to establish rhythmic harmony. A simple past tense is all that is required and is all that the English normally used; anything else is obtrusive and serves no purpose. The Elizabethans, whose prose was very straightforward, considered it a foppish affectation.

Zelazny is also guilty of occasional trick prose; that is, writing nonsense for emotional effect in the hope that you won't notice the meaning. 'Mustaches the color of smoke', he writes. Now tell me what colour the mustaches are — dirty grey, white, blue, sulphur yellow, oil black? And we have this: '. . . the eyes of an ancient bird, electric and clear'. Some bird, with a reverse metabolism. The reader has to be on his guard against this sort of thing.

Also against the bit of James-Bond-type snobbery put over when one character produces a bottle of burgundy from Earth! It must have been a thousand years old, and serve him right who drank it! The reddest of wines would be more acid than vinegar by then. Which only goes to show that it doesn't do to throw these 'effect' bits in without checking first.

Again, in two places Zelazny writes what he possibly thinks is poetry. I'll say one thing for his verses — they are better than the nauseating tripe Heinlein offered as 'balladry' in 'The Green Hills of Earth'. It is a peculiar fact that few novelists can write verse and few poets can write effective novels (Kipling, Hardy and Graves are outstanding exceptions); they simply do not understand each other's media and in practice mishandle them abominably. I only wish Zelazny hadn't done it; he ruined two good scenes with the unnecessary lines. And that's the worst of it — that they were unnecessary.

If all this sounds very minatory, let's not be too concerned over it. The meaning is no more than this — that Zelazny has proved himself capable of the grand effect but still needs to perfect himself in detail. There can be little doubt that he has, if he cares to use it and to really work at it, the literary equipment to sweep the SF board clean as a stylist and technician.

But to do it he will have to be prepared to forego the easy money of pot-boiling for the magazines and make his play among the hardbacks. It is only by tackling the toughest competition that a writer, like an athlete, discovers the limits of his form.

One whom I told I was going to review this book murmured, 'Be kind to it', as though the poor thing had been delivered over to the tigers. *Lord of Light* needs no-one's kindness. Despite weaknesses and shortcomings it can stand up very stoutly for itself.

— © 1968 George Turner; *Australian Science Fiction Review* (first series), No. 18, December 1968, pp. 3–29, 32–4

Golden age, paper age

or, Where did all the classics go?

I

Love is not love [sang Shakespeare]
That alters when it alteration finds,
Or tends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark.

And so we cling to the teddy bear beloved in pre-salad days (taking care not to look at the poor thing lest reality rush in) or to the books we loved at first reading — and now and then reread them and despair. First impressions count for much. And so John Foyster clings to his Golden Age of SF — the 'forties — and small blame to him, because the 'forties produced some memorable SF. And various fan clubs cling to Edgar Rice Burroughs and H. P. Lovecraft, while otherwise businesslike people kiss the dust of John Russell Fearn, alias Vargo Statten, alias Lon Chaney and all his masks. And in the mainstream field there are those who cherish secret yearnings for Berry and Co., the Four Just Men, Doctor Fu Manchu and Billy Bunter.

Alas, I can find no justification for any of these yearnings (explanation, yes, but that's something altogether else) but I remember, I remember . . .

. . . that Tarzan once fascinated me, and I had fantasies about Barsoom. Simon Templar was my ideal of manhood. And now they bore me stiff. Even the SF of the 'forties seems, with powerful exceptions, inept and hollow stuff. Of all the old paper loves, only H. G. Wells remains untarnished. (As a teenager I loved the novels of Sir Walter Scott, but the love I have for them now is a different breed of affection, so he doesn't count.)

We know why these loves flew out the window — we grew up. But what caused love to be born in the first place? What, in fact, was the attraction of these dead works which have come to be called SF classics? Simple youthfulness and naivety? Partly, but I suspect something more than that — that in fact they had some values which from our superior station in time we tend to ignore.

This train of thought was suggested by Damon Knight's review, in his book of SF essays, of *The Blind Spot* by Austin Hall and Homer Eon Flint. It was as merciless a piece of savaging as any novel ever received — and thoroughly deserved — but I wondered why he had bothered to slaughter a book already a quarter of a century dead. (It had just been reissued — a publishing error.) I wondered even more why a writer of Knight's perception had not tried to discover just what made it the SF 'classic' it had been regarded as for many years.

You see, *The Blind Spot* was written in 1920, in the pre-*Amazing* days (yes, Virginia, I know you weren't around) and one of my memories of that period in the late twenties — the flower of the Gernsback era — is of fans writing frenzied pleas for its republication. Whether or not Hugo obliged I can't recall, but I think he did. But by then I had had my first surfeit of SF and did not catch up with the book until the 'forties. And by then it was very much a museum piece.

What was wrong with it? First, the SF gimmick on which it was based was the idea of a world which could be reached by penetrating the 'blind spot' in our vision, that point not far in front of our eyes where focal lines cross and vision is imperfect. The present-day SF reader would not accept that. But call it 'fantasy' and they'll accept anything — and then backtrack and call it SF. So that wasn't much of a fault.

Second, it was deadly slow paced. Half of its 110,000 words could have been chopped without loss. But that was the suspense method of the time — pile up detail and make 'em wait for it. And it is creeping back into modern thriller literature. In ten years or so you may be loving it and pouring scorn on the helter-skelter storytelling of the 'sixties. Just a matter of fashion. So we can't throw the book out on that score.

Finally (there were other things wrong, but three's enough) it ended with the dreary old situation of the earthlings battling against invaders from beyond the blind spot. But that wasn't quite such a dreary old situation in 1920, and if it was handled with conventional crash-thud-wallop, is it handled any better today? No, Virginia, it is not. We get a cover of so-called psychological insight and anthropological hou-ha to account for the downfall of the invaders, but in the end it's the old one-two that really gets 'em — and the readers.

So what made *The Blind Spot* top of the pops in its day? It isn't as though there was no other SF to compare it with — the scene was lousy with the stuff. Then what?

For one thing, it was written in the smooth, unagitated prose which was characteristic of the period, and which comes as a welcome relief from the flea-hop storytelling of today. Not *good* prose, mind you, but a bloody sight better than such as is offered by Laumer and Biggle and Petaja and other contemporary successes. (But on the whole, modern SF prose isn't too bad — just flat, undistinguished and empty.)

And the gimmick was brand new. It would be a reasonable bet that most readers of the time weren't aware that the visual blind spot existed, and the idea had

the charm of novelty. General knowledge of such matters was not nearly as widespread then as it is today. And the SF field was not then plagued by a horde of scribes homing in on any new idea to get a few thousand words out of it while the craze lasted. Remember the 'semantics' period, and the monsters from the past period, and the ESP period, and the robot period, and so on?

The suspense element was maintained successfully through two-thirds of the book — a technical exercise few of our modern boys dare to try — and then thrown overboard for a showdown in a glamorous other-world finale which was at least as good as anything else done at the time.

In fact, it had everything.

What finally damned it was that its virtues were ephemeral. It simply went out of date. It became a bore.

And that has been the fate of practically all the SF written before it or since. How many SF stories are worth reading thirty years after their first appearance? Half a dozen? Two dozen? Not many in a cornucopia of thousands. And thirty years isn't enough to make a classic. Seventy years may be, and only H. G. Wells can fill that bill — nobody, literally *nobody* else. Jules Verne, I submit, is a special case.

Conclusion: with the possible exception of the novels of H. G. Wells, there are no SF classics, and the word should be discarded.

Genre writing does not encourage the production of classics, readable a century hence. In the flourishing field of detective fiction, somewhat allied to SF, how many acknowledged classics exist? Exactly one. It is called *The Moonstone*, it was first published in 1868, and if you haven't read it, Virginia, you should be ashamed.

SF lacks the universality required for classic status, and reviewers who should know better waste too many superlatives on works which will never win even so modest an award as a Hugo, let alone deserve one. (And how many did deserve it?) Each story has its little ecstasy and is done. An occasional novel is republished, such as *Slan*, and Schuyler Miller duly notes the re-emergence of Van Vogt's 'magnificent novel'. But I'll bet he didn't reread it first. It's a dreadful, inept book, with a good start and a frightful finish. ('John Thomas Cross, come into your inheritance!' Oh boy, the drama! And the creaking of the stage props.)

Still, let us not despise *Slan*. It caught the imagination of the moment and added a little more to the central attraction of SF, which is 'ideas'.

Alas, our love alters very smartly when it alteration finds, and yesterday's idols are scrapped without a tear. And so it is intellectually fashionable to toss the head at Asimov, as being one of the old school, when in fact he gave more to SF in the way of ideas and careful writing than any three of the present idols. Wells is considered a drear by too many of the younger readers because he didn't write at a high pitch of hysterics or present epic heroes — they prefer such 'intellectuals' as Delany and Zelazny, those two thoroughgoing adherents of the thud-and-blunder school who can't disguise their rattling skeletons under a load of symbolic and impressionistic prose. (They are both well out of date in the field of contemporary literature, but too many readers haven't discovered it yet.) And as for John Taine — all

right, Virginia, ask me who was John Taine.

Now, I'm not saying that we should all rush out and buy an armload of yesterday's 'greats' and start drooling over them. The fact is that most of them won't repay the effort. SF is basically ephemeral, and who cares for yesterday's ephemerae? What I *am* saying is that we should be a little less blindly enthusiastic about the present product, and that we should learn enough about the past to realise that the amount of true originality in SF is vanishingly small. Nearly everything that matters has been done before — by those stuffy grandfathers whom one can't be bothered with. In fact, let's all pull our back hair right down to the ankles and admit that SF is mass entertainment on about the level of the TV thriller series. In fact, let's go the whole way and admit that the TV thriller is technically much better handled than the average SF yarn.

SF has too many pretensions, and has reached the stage when even the authors are taking themselves seriously. Harlan Ellison on the subject of his 'art' must surely be the joke of the year. There isn't a real artist in the business, and only a handful of good technicians. (I suggest that the real artist finds the SF genre too constricting, and that SF has never since Wells said anything that hasn't been expressed as forcefully, and probably more perceptively, in the 'mainstream'. Anybody want a fight?)

Nevertheless, SF is enjoyable, and makes a pleasant hobby. And, as with any hobby, it is more enjoyable if you know a little more about it than the bit that comes with the latest magazine.

So, just for the hell of it, and perhaps to show that there is more to be looked at than the latest fantasy masquerading as SF, I propose to argue (with justice, I hope) that the true Golden Age of SF was between 1870 and 1910, and that all since then has been a genre in decline. Present popularity means nothing. It takes the originals to show the popularisers how to do it, and even the fabulous forties were only a little hump on the plummeting graph.

II

Modern SF began with Jules Verne. The French had popularised a sort of science fantasy before that (e.g. Flammarion's *End of the World*) but Verne brought it down to earth, and fathered the branch of SF which became epitomised in the early Heinlein stories and the very different but similarly descended early Campbell novels.

Verne was the first to really see that science was an adventure field, the first to look at knowledge and say that with a little push here and a little more knowledge here and a hey presto! and here comes the *Nautilus* and the *Clipper of the Clouds* and the Moon Shot. He was the great extrapolator, and if he committed enormities in the name of extrapolation, his cone of fire was wide enough to score a number of predictive hits. (Few of them were really original with him, but how many SF writer's ideas are? As usual, the scientists were first, and he picked up the more interesting crumbs. The boys are still at it.) His informed guesses were no wider of the mark than those of all the other writers of technological SF. (No, Virginia, Heinlein did not 'predict' the waldo

— he merely gave a popular name to something already in existence.) And he never repeated himself. He did not merely originate the field; he opened it up, from space to subterranea, with a side glance at practically every technology then available for scrutiny. Later writers merely applied the method to new knowledge as it appeared.

And he put SF on the map. He was popular in a fashion that has never been matched since. He gave it the push that made modern SF possible.

And he is today almost unreadable, save by the young. I assure you that the problem is not one of translation; the French versions are as pedestrian as the English. The young can, and do, read him uncritically, lost in the wonder of ideas (because we haven't really caught up with him in practice) and those who didn't read him in their youth have lost the chance forever. Only better techniques make the modern technological SF writer more readable than his master; they have never deviated an inch from the path he marked out; they have added flossier decoration, but have not added a thing to the basic method.

So he has nothing to say to the modern reader. Is he the less important for that? Do we despise Newton because his laws of motion have become the property of schoolboys?

At the same time an American, Edward Bellamy, was writing a dull, verbose tome destined to become one of the all-time bestsellers. It was called *Looking Backward*, and established the method of looking at present-day civilisation through eyes other than our own. It was a notable first, and its descendants are still with us. Nowadays they look through far more alien eyes than Bellamy imagined, but they see little more than he did; they have merely lost the compassion with which he viewed the world.

III

Wells, who was writing during the last years of Verne, added a fillip to the theme of reconsidering our own time — he opened it up to suggest the possibility of other viable civilisations, and did it so well that *The First Men in the Moon* remains the most impressive statement about alien contact. Unlike Verne, he was not greatly interested in the products of technological advancement; he *was* interested in their effects on humanity. So he indulged in no more technicality than was necessary to establish a possibility, then told a story of his own times, with people who were not heroes or geniuses. This, the best aspect of his work, has been largely lost to SF, which has become a form wherein the characters are mostly larger than life and have to be swallowed at a gulp.

But he did much that has not only remained, but has become staple. It pays to look at each of his books separately.

The Time Machine was his first, and its importance to SF was that it proclaimed that time was not a metaphysical concept but a physical one, and might one day be subject to manipulation. The one and only improvement on his ideas in seventy years has been the consideration of paradox. It was also the first of the if-this-goes-on type of stories, wherein present trends are

extrapolated to an extreme conclusion.

The War of the Worlds had nothing much to offer beyond the extreme realism of the method of presentation. This also has been lost to SF, more's the pity. He achieved it by having characters who were recognisably people, without flourishes, strange talents or the knuckleheaded obtuseness of heroes.

In *When the Sleeper Wakes* he wrote the prototype of a million-and-one novels about the man who wakes up in a far tomorrow. And his tomorrow was a real one, not a stage set designed to allow some super-hero to overthrow the rulers. His hero overthrew nothing. He didn't even understand this strange tomorrow. Wells never lost sight of the realities of the human condition; this prototype has been degraded into a blood-and-guts exercise, and extrapolation to little more than a *reductio ad absurdum*. The modern SF writer gets wilder and woollier and piles on the fantasy, but he never relates to home as Wells unflinchingly did. It's the difference between a novelist and a hack. The hack grabs the idea for exploitation; the novelist takes it for examination.

With *Men Like Gods* he opened up the field of parallel universes, and came to the conclusion that if we were offered Utopia we wouldn't want it. What we want is what we have, only more of it. The lesson doesn't seem to have been learned. The modern SF writer operates on the principle that humanity is sufficiently intelligent to desire the better life. Hell!

In *Food of the Gods* he went further, to prod at our penchant for destroying what we do not understand. The modern variations are endless.

The Invisible Man was harsh laughter at a daydream, the one wherein invisibility makes a man a king, inviolable. SF has been savaging daydreams ever since. He failed to note that by any system so far imagined an invisible man must also be blind — and left us a problem that has not yet been satisfactorily solved. That doesn't stop SF writers using invisible men.

The Island of Doctor Moreau was an examination of the appalling pettiness of power for its own sake. It's a challenge that no other SF writer has successfully taken up.

The War in the Air was a warning against using knowledge for destruction. This is a field wherein SF could serve a useful purpose, but prefers to note it and pass on. And, truly, no writer powerful enough to handle it with any impact has arisen.

His other novels, though entertaining, were not true forerunners, but in those cited he covered the bulk of the present SF field. There is little written today that is not a descendant or a variant of a theme Wells touched on. ESP is perhaps the one outstanding exception, and it is doubtful whether that really belongs in the SF pasture — its main use seems to be to provide a way out of unworkable plots.

Wells really *did* something with his SF. He opened the eyes of millions to the possibilities that existed. And his books were fabulously popular; most are still in print, seventy years later. If Verne put SF on the map, Wells consolidated its position.

From that moment on, the genre lived. It lived, unfortunately, in the hands of people who took the melodramatic elements and discarded everything of importance.

So we had thirty dreary years of Burroughs and Cummings and Austin Hall and Homer Eon Flint and Victor Rousseau and George Allen England, all writing with little variation on the themes Verne and Wells had propounded. Themes? Not really. They took over the trappings and invented a few new ones, and swamped it all in high adventure. There's nothing wrong with high adventure, but why call it SF?

One new voice was heard in the thirties, and who would have guessed from 'When the Atoms Failed' that it was to be the most influential voice heard since Wells? Under the prodding of John Campbell, a renaissance began. It did not last, because it had only better writing and better plot ideas to offer. The real breakthrough of new conceptions was not there. It had all been prefigured by the masters.

Since then we have had only more and more pretentious writing, smothering thought in a cloud of words.

Wells and Verne and Bellamy ushered in the Golden Age, and ushered it out again. All since has been decline — wider screens and brighter technicolour and noisier action — and not a new idea in sight.

Oh, there have been occasional good books — *A Case of Conscience*, *Gravy Planet*, and a handful more — but they have not been enough to stimulate the field. The publishers have it firmly in their grip, and the only product better than a good thing is a hundred repro-

ductions of it.

I think I shall give up reading SF.

But I won't, of course.

The next novel may be the one we've all been waiting for.

I don't believe it, of course, but you never know.

Postscript:

I suppose the true Golden Age is the year in which you discover SF and can hardly breathe for excitement. But the rot soon sets in as you turn over the novels and the magazines and get the eternal mixture as before. Even the youngest of us can't swallow the diet for ever, and in youth one is expert at gulping down the indigestible.

But it must have been fun to be hungry for novelty when Wells and Verne were writing, and everything that came from them was utterly new and different.

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,

But to be young was very heaven.

Alas for Wordsworth, he was dead before SF got into its stride. But he did like *Frankenstein*.

— Written in 1969; *SF Commentary* No. 11, May 1970

One of John Bangsund's most ambitious schemes, after *ASFR* had died and while his new magazine *Scythrop* was still developing, was to hold an academic symposium on the life and work of John W. Campbell Jr, who died in 1971. Despite John's efforts at publicising the symposium, SF fans rather than academics attended, and it ended an era rather than beginning one. John produced *John W. Campbell: An Australian Tribute* — the entire proceedings of the symposium, including this fine contribution by George Turner.

John W. Campbell:

Writer, editor, legend

An address to

John W. Campbell: A Symposium, University of Melbourne,
16 September 1971.

Reprinted in John Bangsund (ed.): *John W. Campbell: An Australian Tribute*, Canberra, 1972,
and *John W. Campbell: Writer, Editor, Legend*, for the Fantasy Amateur Press Association, 1974

With the death of John Campbell science fiction loses the most towering and influential figure of its erratic, fascinating and vociferous career. Like him, hate him,

praise him or flay him, he remains at stage centre, commanding your respect even while you finger your overripe egg.

He commanded — and still commands — respect because, whatever you may think of the results, he lived in the heart of the SF turmoil and did more than any other to tame, direct and educate its surges and flailings.

John Campbell and I came upon SF at much the same time, in its magazine baby days; he would have been my senior by not too many years. When I read his first story I was an adolescent gulper of wonders and he was an older teenager studying at MIT and writing to pay for the car his father had decreed must be purchased by his own effort.

He probably got the car in short order, even with the author rates paid in those austere days, for he was prolific and immediately popular.

The writer

John Campbell's fiction is, with one extraordinary exception, not outstandingly memorable. Its importance lies in what he did with it.

He cannot be considered a good writer, though in later years he achieved a pounding and highly individual style. His own famous editorial on literary virtues and SF is sufficient to demonstrate the limits of his horizons. Yet he became, in practice, more competent — even more artistic — than his declared values would seem to permit. There were many such inconsistencies in the man.

The first Campbell story I ever read was 'When the Atoms Failed', in *Amazing Stories* about forty years ago. It was, I think, his first story published. (This is reminiscence in flow, and I shall not stop for pedantic check of date and detail.) I remember little of it, save that the action was laid on Mars, the heroes were the beloved super-scientists of our youth, and I liked it. It was followed quickly by a sequel, 'The Metal Horde', relating the sad fate of an invasion from Venus, and notable for its featuring super mass production, a theme he returned to several times in the early tales. Activity on the grandest scale fascinated him — and us — in that unsophisticated time.

Soon came 'Piracy Preferred', a 20,000-word novella, the first of the Arcot, Morey and Wade stories, which swung him to the top of the SF tree. It contained, as did all Campbell stories, an original 'scientific' idea — in this case the harnessing of molecules for motive power by forcing every particle in a body to regiment its random motion into a single direction. It got rid of the acceleration problem also.

In the sequel, 'Solarite', he had some ideas about invisibility, and in this connection there entered on the scene the biggest name in SF of the day — 'Skylark' Smith. In the *Amazing Stories* 'Discussions' column, they argued Campbell's point that spraying an invisible ship with paint would render it visible. Smith, fresh from his triumph with *Spacehounds of IPC*, said No; Campbell, entrenched in his MIT training, argued Yes. I forget who won, if either, but the battle served to plant young Campbell firmly in the minds of the readers. Whoever could do battle with the redoubtable Doc Smith and emerge with typewriter unscratched must be someone to watch.

And so he was.

In 'The Black Star Passes', third of the series, he

devised lux metal, formed of solid photons, then capped the lot with his two full-length novels, *Islands of Space* and *Invaders from the Infinite*, both in *Amazing Stories Quarterly*. The motivating force of the series was the search for ever greater sources of power. In the last book, the good ship *Thought* was powered by conventional sources (we called it atomic energy in those days), hotted up by time compression and directed by thought, giving practically infinite speed and energy potential. And that seemed about the limit in novelty until Smith returned with the inertialess drive.

All these were as plotless as stories can be. The hero invented a super-gadget, took off for space and had adventures, invented a fresh super-gadget every few thousand words, and returned home just in time to take off in the sequel. The characters were sticks, the incidents stock, the writing corny, and everything was as gigantic, imponderable, catastrophic and coruscating as even Smith could envision for his own epics.

The tales make heavy going now, but they represent a culminating point in science fiction history. Campbell himself knew their deficiencies, but noted in his introduction to the Ace reprint that they had a 'youthful exuberance'. This is perhaps their fitting epitaph, and not a bad one.

He followed them with 'Beyond the End of Space' and 'Uncertainty', but the day of Gargantua was done. With *Invaders from the Infinite* he had stretched super-technological fantasy as far as the physics of the day could allow. Unintentionally he had put an end to an era in SF. A change of direction was needed.

His last work for *Amazing Stories* was 'Mother World'. It was still full of gadgetry, but the mood was softer and the writing taking on a little quality and force. 'Don A. Stuart' was in gestation, though not to be born for some years yet.

Perhaps his style no longer suited *Amazing's* policy, for he then switched to a respectable collection of novellas for *Wonder Stories* and its satellite magazines. The ideas were still original and exciting but more down to earth, and he showed some attention to plot and meaning.

The Mightiest Machine, in the up-and-coming *Astounding Stories*, was his final full-length venture into super-technology. Thereafter the orientation changed. He cast off the old Campbell style completely and emerged as 'Don A. Stuart'.

Despite his later fulminations against 'establishment' criticism and conceptions of good writing, Campbell had ideas of his own on the subject, and these were in essence quite conventionally literate. He lacked literary training, but the instincts were there and now came to the surface.

Having written the super-power period of SF out of a job, he set out, quite deliberately, to change the face of the genre. F. Orlin Tremaine, editor of *Astounding*, had under rein a stable of writers competent enough by the standards of the day — Williamson, Weinbaum, Simak, Schachner, Gallun and others — but these were still hobbled by the Gernsback conventions within which they were raised. He had a vision of a new SF, and if writers could not be prodded or coaxed into producing it, then they must be shown how. Stuart, an imme-

diate and resounding success, must have been a god-send to Tremaine. Later he made Campbell an assistant editor.

To his lasting credit, Campbell had done one of the most dangerous and unnerving things a writer can attempt: he had discarded his natural style and moulded himself a new one. Between Campbell and Stuart there was no observable connection until the deception was finally revealed.

As Stuart he produced stories with impact, stories at once recognised as the work of a major prophet of change in the genre — ‘Dead Knowledge’, ‘Forgetfulness’, ‘Twilight’ and many more. He even turned his attention to fantasy, with a quite creditable short novel, *The Elder Gods*.

True to his basic form, each of these tales featured an idea new to SF or an unexpected view of an old one, for he had a full gift of imagination. But Stuart did not feature gimmickry for its own sake; these were ideas about the possibilities of the mysterious universe, not mere attempts to crack the sky with power.

Stylistically they were nearly unique in their day. Looking back, we can trace the influences of Merritt, Williamson and others of the yearning super-beautiful school, but Campbell pruned away the wordiness and striving for mind-shattering effect, supplanting it with a simple, lucid prose and carefully chosen language. Eventually he outgrew these influences also, and reached his personal perfection in ‘Who Goes There?’, surely one of the harshest and most dramatically effective novellas in the genre. If he never quite outgrew his literary weaknesses — the occasional brashness, the too-pervasive soulfulness — he succeeded despite them by sheer ingenuity and an instinctive compactness of thought.

Theodore Sturgeon referred to the Stuart stories as ‘basic science fiction’, and this was, in a different sense, true. They were Campbell’s base for a revolution.

That the revolution succeeded is history, and his work was done. ‘Don A. Stuart’ retired, and Editor Campbell wrote little fiction thereafter. He had other wars to wage.

The editor

When Campbell succeeded Tremaine as editor of *Astounding*, radical change became his target. He has been loaded with the entire credit for the revolution he headed, but this is at least unfair to his predecessor, who had been similarly dissatisfied and had done much to prepare the ground. An earlier editor, Harry Bates, had also written stories to demonstrate his ideas and had influenced his writers to pay more attention to the literary virtues of style and presentation. And there Campbell was in luck; the time was ripening and he was the man on the spot to direct the harvest. Take nothing away from him on the ground of luck; there was much yet to do, and he buckled to the job of doing it.

For a year or so he achieved a little slowly. Old names faded and new ones made cautious appearances. A more flexible and thoughtful SF appeared as writers tried to follow his lead. Then, in a period of two or three years, he was presented with the golden chance he needed and deserved.

The prolific Henry Kuttner, purveyor of goshwow extraordinary, revamped himself, took C. L. Moore to wife, and with her became the inimitable Lewis Padgett; L. Sprague de Camp lumbered into view with his store of intellectual curiosities; Robert Heinlein popped from nowhere with a basketful of new and individual tales; A. E. Van Vogt turned the technological thriller upside down and gave it new life; Theodore Sturgeon moved in with immediate authority; and Isaac Asimov began, inconspicuously at first, the career which was to make him one of the most successful and in some ways most extraordinary figures in the SF scene.

Campbell recognised his luck and made the most of it. With a successful magazine on his hands he was free to experiment and innovate. And, strangely, his first turn was towards fantasy.

The so-practical, so-factual mind opened a crack to display a keen appreciation of the possibilities, hilarious or macabre, of witches and warlocks, vampires and leprechauns, pentagrams and bottled djinni, mermaids and things abump in the night. *Unknown* was born, so titled because its contents were to be unpredictable. He tried, with every variety of fantasy, to keep them so.

But even here SF was not far from his mind. He preferred his fantasy logical and clear cut, and much of the content of *Unknown* could have sat on either side of the fence. The first issue contained Russell’s *Sinister Barrier*, complete. (Seventy thousand words, plus short stories! They were fat issues way back when.) Heinlein’s ‘The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag’ also appeared there, and de Camp quite typically made the best of both worlds by putting magic on a scientific basis.

It is possible that this fusion of science fiction and fantasy provided the springboard for the frightening proliferation of styles and sub-genres that bedevils us today. Fritz Leiber’s first Grey Mouser story appeared in *Unknown*, but neither he nor Campbell could have foreseen the disgraces of sword-and-sorcery that would later invade SF.

Unknown became a war casualty as austerity hit the pulps, and its equal has not been seen since.

If he regretted the loss, Campbell wasted no time in turning to the further remaking of *Astounding*. He tried changes of format and size (some but not all forced by wartime exigency) and was quick to drop what did not succeed. He dug new illustrators out of their studios or from their kitchen drawing boards. He tried photographic centre pages and the astronomical paintings of Chesley Bonestell; he introduced fact articles of greater and greater concentration on ‘hard’ science until he was able to command work of high calibre from actual men of research. He redesigned *Astounding* a dozen times, each time nearer to his heart’s desire, until the final triumph of replacing the old pulp title with *Analog*, in a series of slow changes to fade out the old and fade in the new.

His personal stamp on the magazine showed in the editorials, growing steadily longer and wider ranging, infuriating as many as they pleased but never going unread. They were generally overlong and over-explicit, but they had the cardinal virtue of clarity, and if one thing was made very clear it was that they were the work of a crusader. Of this, more later. We know that he was merciless to his contributors, that he knew what he

wanted and damned well dragged it out of them, no matter how much rewriting was involved. While many have referred with gratitude to his perfectionist bludgeoning (A. Bertram Chandler and James Blish among them), others have mentioned it in terms of impotent exhaustion, and Judith Merrill has recorded the bitterness of trying to win an argument against him.

Be these things as they may, he moulded *Analog* into the foremost magazine in the field, and leaves it still where he placed it. Readership changes; new generations find new requirements, old readers tire of the *Analog* content. New writers refuse to bow to the immutable Campbell canon. *Analog* goes on regardless. Successfully.

As editor, he was something of a phenomenon.

The legend

What manner of man was Campbell?

Only his family and perhaps a few close friends can tell us that. Much has been said and written, but for us who know him only as a name on paper he can be no more than partially real, partaking of the nature of legend.

Kingsley Amis accused him of trying to destroy science fiction. Kurt Vonnegut pilloried him brutally in several works, and did himself no credit thereby. Alan Nourse included some incautious satire in 'The Aliens Are Coming' — and disappeared from Campbell pages thereafter. (Cause and effect? I'd like to know.)

But these glimpses are by the way. What can we glean from his writings?

His MIT days demonstrate that he was a lad of some determination and a good student. Anyone who can knock out 100,000 words a year between studies and still complete his course successfully has to be both. His remarkable change of literary personality from Campbell to Stuart underlines the point. It also indicates that his anti-literary diatribes were less than totally sincere. In the old *Amazing Stories* days he had been assaulted powerfully in the 'Discussions' column for lack of literary skill; possibly these darts wounded more than he admitted, or perhaps realised.

That he had a vivid but eminently practical imagination is evidenced by everything he wrote. Turn up old copies of *Unknown* and wonder at the fact that everything in them — wild, wonderful, joyous, tragic, macabre — was selected by that same practical intelligence.

But was it always practical?

I have said that he was a crusader, and one of his earliest crusades was in favour of Dianetics, later to develop into Scientology of ill repute. He published the first Hubbard article on Dianetics, and readers wrote in shoals to point out that most of it was unintelligible and the rest nonsense. Dianetics faded from the Campbell arena after a short but noisy stay. His own connection with Scientology continued, but he knew better than to play his readers an unpopular tune. He was, enthusiasms and all, a practical man.

He crusaded noisily, energetically and angrily for the investigation of para-phenomena, and built himself a Hieronymous Machine which apparently did the things claimed for it. That effort also faded in time. (Perhaps

he became sick of psi, as the rest of us did, when nine stories out of ten featured it.)

He crusaded for implausible machinery which defied the laws of physics, for a miracle cancer cure, and for anything else that smelt of an underdog being underfed.

But this was not mere twig-hopping or simple enthusiasm run wild. Behind it all was a heartfelt cry: 'I don't know if the thing works and neither does anyone else, but why the hell isn't it being investigated?'

He hated hidebound thinking, the thinking that says 'It defies logic' and thereafter refuses to admit the idea's existence. The chances are that most of the gadgets and panaceas he fulminated over were failures (otherwise big business would have been smartly in on the game) and that more investigation had been done than he was aware of, but his attitude was a right one. There should be more of it.

His editorials show him as a perfectionist. He practised the Shavian technique of taking a piece of 'common knowledge', inverting it and shaking the unhappy guts out of it. He wanted to demonstrate what things are, not to accept the universal view, and with it the universal fate of inevitable damnation.

Alas, he wanted us all to think logically, and most of us disappointed him. If there are signs that he saw himself as a father-figure of wisdom, and indications that his was the only acceptable logic, let us not be too harsh about it. Lose your patience some time — and then look carefully at your own displayed attitudes. With fellow feeling the legend takes on flesh.

Like them or leave them, his orations were stimulating and thought provoking (or merely provoking) and, that being so, the one-eyed view takes on virtue.

In his eccentric way he loved the humanity that irritated him so, even while he lashed it ferociously. He cared for its future. Only impatient love can explain so many beatings.

That he loved science fiction scarcely needs to be said. The mere thought of personally reading thousands upon thousands of manuscripts over a period of more than thirty years, knowing that a good half of them will be appalling, would stifle anything less than devotion. And consciously to set to work to remake a genre closer to the heart's desire is the act of a lover.

Allow me the whole quotation:

Ah, Love, could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits and then
Remould it closer to our heart's desire?

That was John Campbell as science fiction knew him. The rest is an accretion of opinion, hearsay and point of view. The reality remains indistinct.

But there will be legends told of him.

What is truth? said jesting Pilate, with no one to tell him that the truth of a human being is the accumulation of legend around his memory.

A man is only dead when the legend finally fades.

— 1971

As far as his friends were concerned, George Turner disappeared from about the middle of 1969 until September 1970, when I walked into McGill's Newsagency, Melbourne, and there was George Turner, seemingly unchanged, inspecting the new science fiction titles. We talked a little. He said nothing about his disappearance. He explained nothing. I asked if he was still writing reviews. He said yes, and a few weeks later sent the following article. To find out the complete story of what happened during that year we had to wait until Judy Buckrich's biography, *George Turner: A Life* (Melbourne University Press, 1999), pp. 103–10. When George returned from Sydney after the most disastrous episode in his life, financially and emotionally, he borrowed a typewriter from John Bangsund, read all the major SF titles missed during his year away, and sent me this article. For this reason alone, I would reprint it here. I also treasure it because it represents almost the last time any SF reviewer could cover the major SF novels for any one year in one article. It's also a deliciously annoying piece of polemic directed against many of my favourite writers.

Back to the cactus:

The current scene, 1970

Boredom sets in eventually. After forty-odd years of reading SF one gets pangs of acute apathy, and there's nothing for it but to swear off until the urge returns. This was my fourth or fifth turning of the back on SF, and it lasted about twelve months. When the time came to take up the drug again I could only stand petrified at the rash of new titles waiting to be read. It simply wasn't possible. The only thing to do was to ask advice. What should I read in order to become reasonably up to date? What are the current books of note?

Dependable John Bangsund whipped up an armload with the ease of dusting a shelf and much the same movement. 'These are the current scene!' I noted that none of them was really a new title, but then the current discussable books rarely are. Bruce Gillespie insisted on *Ubik* — what else could a devotee recommend? And I picked a tentative few for myself.

And in a dazed fortnight read some twenty novels.

I'd like to talk about some of them — not to review them, because that has probably been done *ad nauseam* — but to look at them in relation to their authors and to some other things, such as critics, New Wavery and blurb writers. (Note to B. Gillespie: don't expect a nice, tidy essay with all the loose ends tied up. This one is going wherever the material takes it.)

Kurt Vonnegut in the slaughterhouse

Vonnegut has a big reputation in SF and out of it. Even *Time* reviews him with doubtful awe. *Player Piano* was a fine novel in its day and *The Sirens of Titan* a hilarious one in any day; *Cat's Cradle* was a chilling story and *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* an ambiguous and fragmented one. Now, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* he has set out to write the novel of all his novels and, incidentally, to tear himself to pieces and the world with him.

He says unequivocally in the opening chapter that this is the book he has been trying to write since he

began novelising. Take that with a grain of salt; any writer's (or other artist's) statements about himself tend more to rationalised hindsight than strict accuracy. But, since he insists on it as an integral part of the novel, the book must be accepted as his definitive statement to date. Therefore let the reader beware and watch where he is being led.

In fact, he is being led nowhere new. Humanity stinks but must be regarded with compassion, particularly with respect to its dropouts, weaklings and misfits. 'The meek shall inherit the earth', if there's any earth to inherit when the strong have finished with it. One wonders if Vonnegut realises the paranoid insult inherent in this form of compassion, and suspects that he does. That makes his cosmic jesting a mite vicious as well as unbalanced.

Vicious? That darling man?

Look a little closer.



Look at the extrapolated parody of John W. Campbell, for instance. Although I find Campbell politically naïve and stylistically irritating, I hold no brief for the presentation of him as a traitor, ersatz Nazi and coat-tail hanger-on of conquerors. These things he emphatically is not; his weaknesses lie in other directions.

Look next at the conception of time. The Tralfamadorians — ex-*Sirens of Titan* — see time as static, like a landscape in which all action, from universal birth to extinction, exists in a permanent now. So a Tralfamadorian sees a man not as a two-legged being passing through time but as a sort of millipede with short legs at one end of his life and long ones at the other. A neat illustration.

This conception involves predestination, because in a motionless time all things are as they are and unchangeable, and this is firmly laid down at several points in the novel. Then why the rantings about brutality, stupidity and the debased condition of Man? His semi-idiot hero is no better or worse than the rest, despite his Christly innocence, because he has no choice between innocence and sophistication. What is, unchangeably is. This is nihilism *in extremis*, prepared to destroy even itself.

Is Vonnegut savagely condemning the world or merely despairing of it? Neither, I think. He appears in person at several points in the narrative, and in one such appearance comments uncomfortably on this static-time idea. He doesn't like it. He adopts the position of a man who believes but hopes it isn't so. He holds out no hope for humanity but insists on loving it although it cannot, in the nature of the Vonnegut universe, be anything but beastly. One suspects his real pity is for himself. Vonnegut wants a way out.

Making himself a character in the book was a tactical error. What might have been taken for vengeful satire becomes apparent as a flailing in the dark and, as so often with articulate flailers, personal spites spew out.

One of these is his thoroughgoing contempt for SF. Kilgore Trout of *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* is with us again, pilloried unmercifully and more than a little unjustly, and the Tralfamadorians are the ultimate parody of all the SF super-starmen yet invented. It is surprising, then, that the present generation of SF readers (mostly comparatively young and very defensive about their loves and hates) care to nestle Vonnegut in their uncritical bosoms. He should be for them a focus of vituperation.

Or do these readers also tend to nihilism as self-destruction? If so, I am shocked; but then, I believe in free will, which at least gives me the right to be shocked at what I see and hear. However, I really don't think they are psychological nihilists. I *do* think they are people held fascinated by the individual brilliances of a book (there are many in *Slaughterhouse-Five* — that's the peril of it) and fail to coordinate them into a true picture of the author's statement.

Slaughterhouse-Five is a repellent book, however interesting and readable, because the writer has missed his mark, and has missed it because he is constantly mis-directed by the motes in his vision. He is uncomfortably aware of the presence of motes but cannot detect their nature. (How many of us can?) They keep him in a dazzle of wrong turnings and he is flailing to get out.



In this, he has a not-so-distant relationship with Philip K. Dick, which brings us hopefully to:

Philip K. Dick saying it all over again

But hope lies bleeding. I have always enjoyed Dick's work on the superficial level of entertainment and yet been aware of dissatisfaction on deeper levels. After a year without him, *Ubik* crystallises the dissatisfaction; my day as a Dick fan is nearly over.

Here is the book of a man who shudders between the real and the unreal, who sees alternatives as realities and realities as a transient phase among alternatives. Alternatives and realities coexist, and even influence each other (*Ubik*, *Now Wait for Last Year* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*), and through this incredibly complex universe Dick tries to trace a path. It can't be done. The human brain cannot reduce an infinite number of possibilities to a story pattern simply by selecting what appeals, particularly when one realises that effects can initiate their own causes, as in *Counter-Clock World*.

Many years ago Dick announced his theme in *Eye in the Sky*, but the depth of his involvement was not observable in that lighthearted piece of fun. Perhaps the tales featuring the Perky Pat game were the first real step into the confusion. These predicated a search for alternative reality on the part of the players; later *The World Jones Made* and *Time Out of Joint* suggested that perhaps it was the author who searched.

In *Martian Time-Slip* the sense of all possible reality vanished, became a shifting thing. Later books have tended to become extended metaphors of this idea, and have become increasingly disfigured by unresolvable complexities that only tend to show that the idea itself is invalid and/or cannot be expressed in the prose of an apparently material universe.

In *Counter-Clock World*, Dick used reverse time as the frame for his thesis, and ran head on into impractical complications. Living backwards cannot be done in a

universe obeying physical laws as we know them, and Dick had to admit these laws in order to remain comprehensible; he simply ignored the impossibilities and paradoxes and ploughed straight over them. His analogy for multiple realities or, if you like, the absence of all reality, fails because it depends on basic realities for its existence.

The same can be said of *Now Wait for Last Year* and its parallel time lines. The basic premise made the plot unworkable, so some aspects of the premise had to be ignored. This just won't do in a man conducting a running argument with the universe.

In *Ubik* we are given the living and the half-living; the half-living are actually dead but existing in another version of reality until their vestigial remainders of consciousness finally drain away. Their 'reality' is subject to manipulation by a strong personality among the half-living, which piles complexity on complexity until inconsistencies begin to stand out like protest posters. The plotting is neat but cannot override the paradoxes. The metaphor fails because it cannot stand against the weight of reality as we know it.

This is plainly an obsession with Dick. He is too intelligent not to know that his plots are snow jobs, so one can only assume that he is being defiant, shouting, 'I know it is so, and some day I'll find a way to demonstrate it.' My bet is that he won't.

At the moment an accomplished writer is imprisoned in a vicious circle. What personal statement Dick has published tends to confirm the obsessional nature of his preoccupation and also suggests, between the lines, some psychological reasons for it. I refer to his letter published by Bruce Gillespie in *SF Commentary* 6. As of now he remains an entertaining writer battling against a brick wall; he must either break through it or become a repetitive bore.

To sum up, *Ubik* is not the great book so many have recommended to me. It is as good as most of his work, but cannot compare with *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, in whose drug-infested pages he came close to presenting a believable universe of shivering unrealities.

Like Vonnegut, he is imprisoned and wants to get out. Unlike Vonnegut, he does not release his spites as satire, but Vonnegut is the better writer and more likely to impress. Both are, in their ways, dangerous to the impressionable. They write with authority, and authority must always be suspect if we are to retain personal values. Their works entertain with ideas, but enthusiasm should not become uncritical acceptance.

And, speaking of uncritical acceptance, the critics are with us in full voice when we come to

Joanna Russ considering chaos

Fritz Leiber: '*And Chaos Died* explores . . . what telepathy and clairvoyance would actually *feel like*. The result is a stunning achievement.'

Robert Silverberg: 'I wouldn't really call it a novel at all. I'd call it a trip.'

Samuel Delany: 'Miss Russ has taken it on herself to put the reader *through* the experience [of psi phenomena]. The result is a stunning achievement.'

Two 'stunning achievements' out of three makes for expectation. One opens the book and discovers a dedi-

cation split between S. J. Perelman and Vladimir Nabokov, and recalls that Joanna Russ is a poet and a university professor. One is overwhelmed by the company one is keeping and can have no doubt that the adulation of the three blurbs is deserved to the limit.

Can one? This one can.

Well, the prose is uniformly excellent, as is to be expected from the author of *Picnic on Paradise*. It is also subtle, witty and occasionally profound, as is also to be expected from etc. . . . But the appearance of two major characters from Kafka as minor symbols in *And Chaos Died* gives the game away. We are to be treated to Art, capital A and all.

And by God aren't we! For the first ninety pages, at any rate.

Kafka was always understandable — he was a good enough artist to make sure of that. Miss Russ is not always so indulgent. Silverberg referred to this novel as 'a trip'. I am tempted to call it an unnecessary complication of basically simple ideas, but that would be leaning too heavily in the other direction, though there is some justification for it.

Despite the ravings, there is nothing new in *And Chaos Died*. A couple of Earthmen are stranded on the planet of a psi-oriented group of forgotten colonists (or lost crew members or something of that sort — it isn't important) who have developed their powers in generations of isolation. One Earthman is a clod who gets nowhere with them; the other is a sensitive type who eventually becomes psi himself (and the grand scale, too) and marries the heroine.

All the enthrallment is in the first ninety pages, wherein Miss Russ goes flat out to show what it must be like to be floundering in a psi-oriented world. To some extent she succeeds, but it is no Trip; one has to concentrate in order to catch everything that is going on; one can't just relax into it. This section is worth the effort, though that same effort militates against reader identification. The rest of the book is well-written banality, with a generous lashing of sex that isn't nearly as funny as it is meant to be, a conclusion visible 60 or 70 pages off and a fistful of cardboard characters.

Delany, Silverberg and Leiber should save their ecstasies for a better occasion. This type of book had sooner or later to be attempted, and the attempt deserves applause. But, despite the lady's undeniable gifts, it remains an attempt, admirable but not ecstatically so. *Picnic on Paradise* was a better novel in every department.

Why the hell do writers give themselves over to hyperbole? What are they to say when the real thing comes along?

We meet the blurb writers again, but in a different context, when we consider

Ron Goulart enjoying himself no end

It is nice, at this stage, to come to a novel I enjoyed without reservation but, if the cover blurbs are to be taken seriously, I enjoyed it for all the wrong reasons.

'A rousing satire on tomorrow,' says the heading.

'Alive with satire, with merriment and fun,' says Philip Dick, who should know better.

'Ron Goulart, like a totally sane Jonathan Swift, kills more clichés and pretensions than Carter has liver pills,'

says Avram Davidson, who should have killed that particular pretension before it left his typewriter.

And I won't quote Joanna Russ's contribution because what she says is sensible and I want to say some of it myself.

The blurbs play up this novel, *After Things Fell Apart*, as satire. On what? On everything, says a bit of the Davidson effusion that I forbore to quote. Now 'everything' is a large order, difficult to fill; if the book satirises anything worthwhile at all it is the type of story that postulates an unlikely future, then sets busily to work to undo it. Satire is undoubtedly present in the small side swipes that are a part of almost any readable novel, but they are not the *raison d'être* the cover-puffers would have us believe.

One might, if pressed, accept Goulart's series of little futures in a collapsed and fragmented America as a sort of if-this-goes-on extension of present trends and therefore peripherally satirical, but in fact he doesn't extrapolate the trends much beyond anything to be found in today's newspaper. He simply gives us our world in Cinerama and brassily lit Technicolor.

And why not? After all, what he tells is a private-eye yarn set against exotic social backgrounds with loads of action and spit-spit dialogue and a nicely 'normal' hero who bashes his way imperturbably to success and the girl as much by luck as by judgment. But it moves. It is unpretentious, competently written within its format, plotted for excitement rather than probability and calculated to keep the reader in hot pursuit of its twists and surprises.

It isn't quite another *Logan's Run*, but whoever enjoyed that piece of gusty nonsense should enjoy *After Things Fell Apart*. Forget the blurbers; they are at the tired old game of finding significance where only entertainment is the goal. Here the goal is reached.

Reading back, I note that the word 'pretentious' and its variations are appearing fairly often. Which puts me in mind of the New Wave, God rest its rather simple soul, and brings me with a sigh of despair to

Michael Moorcock serving up printer's pi

The book is *The Black Corridor*; it is flotsam on the New Wave and should be jetsam. I am immune to New Waves. I have survived a number of them, under similar names, since I learned to spell out *The Magic Pudding* and *Alice in Wonderland* some fifty years ago. Each one contributes a little — just a little — to the totality of literature and splashes away, its ocean-roar of protest muted to a forgettable whimper. Literature most unfairly goes on without it, having taken what was useful and excreted the other 98 per cent.

The Black Corridor contains nothing useful.

In it a paranoid world — Earth in the early twenty-first century — spews up a paranoid hero who steals a spaceship in order to take his family and friends to a far star where they can begin over again to find the 'true values', etc. The hero is pilot, the remainder are in suspended animation. In his loneliness his latent paranoia develops alarmingly until — well, the outcome is a little ambiguous, so let me not spoil it for anyone who wishes to find out for himself. This ambiguity and much of the treatment of the paranoid delusions are the best

things in the book and are very good indeed, but the remainder is determinedly New Wave, with all its excesses and sillinesses.

For example, the novel opens like this:

Space is infinite.

It is dark.

Space is neutral.

Stars occupy minute areas of space. They are clustered
a few billion here. A few billion there.

Space does not threaten.

Space does not comfort.

Space is the absence of time and of matter.

Perhaps this spacing is meant to give an illusion of poeticism, perhaps an illusion of portentousness. Alas, it is no more than a series of banal statements in banal prose. One shudders at the thought of a whole novel of it. That is not given to us, but the same sort of thing, with variations, recurs throughout the book, reaching a climax of hysterical typesetting on pages 86 through 91 (Ace Special edition). I forbear description; it has to be looked at to be believed. 'Looked at', because only the grimly determined would bother to read it. I did so in the interest of fair play and can affirm that it adds nothing to the book.

Alfred Bester began this sort of thing in *The Demolished Man* (as far as SF is concerned — the poets were at it long before that) but he used it for a purpose and achieved an effect. Moorcock uses it for an effect and achieves an exhaustion of the reader's patience with pretentious gimmickry. And succeeds in holding up the story at a point where it should move.

He also New Waves his banner of freedom in the use of obscenity. There's nothing against the use of four-letter words if they serve a literary purpose; the continued use of any word, obscene or not, that serves no purpose is plain bad writing.

Moorcock serves us five helpings — from memory — of 'fucking'; four of these are unnecessary and distracting; the fifth is used surprisingly well to initiate a small incident and illuminate a psychological trend. It nearly misses effectiveness because repetition has already dulled the response. The nominal form, 'fuck', is used twice by a minor female character under circumstances in which any woman of even minimal sensitivity would have found a better and truer expression than one of the audially ugliest words in the language.

I quote: 'You don't want one last fuck? For old time's sake?'

She comes to a sticky end, which I approved of.

What irritates is that *The Black Corridor* is basically a good novel abominably mishandled.

But for the SF addict there is compensation in the welcome form of

Ursula Le Guin giving a lesson on how to do it

John Bangsund has dinned Le Guin into my ears for many a moon and I have resisted blandishment because too many female writers are softly, persuasively and

emptily the same. *Mea culpa!* Mrs Le Guin is *not* the same; she is a steed of a very other colour.

There is a species of super-beautiful prose style that eventually cloy like a diet of clotted cream and honey. Reviewers tend to refer to it as poetic, which it is not. Merritt and Williamson used it in the dear old days, John Campbell had a crack at it in his *alter ego* as Don A. Stuart, Anne McCaffrey dabbles in it today, and the sword-and-sorcery boys use a debased form of it under the impression that it lends archaic dignity to essentially undignified goings-on.

Mrs Le Guin uses a variant of it. Don't recoil. She uses it with sinew and muscular control, and knows how to discard it unobtrusively when it does not suit the immediate subject. The result is a continuous fascination which carries the reader over roughnesses and ineptitudes that otherwise would jar intolerably. I had to finish *Rocannon's World* before I realised that it was padded, ill constructed, deplorably plotted and utterly old hat. One up to the lady for tricking this old and jaded palate.

But that was her first novel, a beginner's triumph of manner over content.

Moving directly to her latest, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, what a difference is here! The fumbling plotter has gone with the wind of time, the literary padder has pared her style to essentials, and the fantasist has become an SF writer. More — she has become a novelist with something to say.

The story is superficially one of intrigue on a distant world, of an Envoy seeking to bring this world into a larger federation of worlds. On a more personal level it treats of a 'normal' man trying to come to terms with an ambisexual race. The people of Gethen are genderless, containing the potentiality of both sexes. Their sexual urge is cyclic, with male or female responses surfacing according to which partner is hormonally dominant at the time. For four-fifths of the time they have no sexual urge at all.

On the final, important level, Mrs Le Guin attacks the problem of finding points of contact and understanding between two persons of utterly opposed psychological orientation. The Envoy's thinking derives from a sexually motivated race; his friend/opponent thinks with the larger freedom (with some concomitant restrictions) of one to whom sex is a periodic facet of life, so that other matters can be considered without the influence of the continual surge of the gonads. These people of Gethen are probably the first true aliens presented in SF, so the author has succeeded where a thousand monster-mongers have failed. She realises the problem in some depth and presents it with acuteness and a very wide appreciation of the fundamental differences involved.

She finds a solution that is valid within the framework, and she left this reader with a sense of having finished a thoroughly satisfactory novel. It has its faults, mainly structural. So has *War and Peace*. Mrs Le Guin is, as of this book, the best SF writer in the world.

***Nova* and Samuel R. Delany**

The last sentence above was, of course, written by Algis Budrys to describe Samuel Delany and *Nova*. My protest



is hereby recorded. Much good it will do me among the Delany fans.

I had read only one earlier novel, *The Einstein Intersection*, and found it a formless hotch-potch of ill-digested and ill-matched myth and folklore with pretensions of portentousness which fell apart under a straight stare. Stylistically it was well enough, with signs of a real competence to come, but was ruined by obtrusive and unnecessary chapter-head essays that were partly irrelevant and sometimes — in what purported to be extracts from his diary — mildly embarrassing.

In *Nova* I looked for some fulfilment of a talent heretofore cluttered with decoration but also loaded with promise. What I found was peculiarly inept for a man with five or six novels already under his belt. Awards and adulation to one side, for Delany is not yet a good novelist. And he is a damn bad SF writer.

Nova is spoiled, aside from the blatant gimmickry and non-science, by the continual presence of the writer, an incessant background hum of Delany murmuring, 'Now listen to this bit!' This is probably an unfortunate side effect of his almost frantic striving for style, for atmosphere at all costs, for profundity where none exists, for words and more words as if critical reaction must be beaten to its knees. It doesn't work. One has seen too much of it, from John Russell Fearn onwards, to be fooled.

This would matter less if the flesh were draped on a sturdy skeleton, but it is not. The story, baldly, is of the attempt of a spaceship owner-captain to snatch a priceless load of Illyrion (Delany's capital letter) metal from the heart of a nova, where alone it can be found in better-than-minimal quantities. The pseudo-scientific reasoning for this provenance will make you squirm if you can't just swallow it whole and pretend it wasn't there. His lifetime enemy means to prevent him getting

it because it will upset the economic balance of the galaxy and therefore his private financial empire also; he would, in fact, like to have it himself. Neither gives a damn for galactic economics or the consequences to people, despite a little pious talk thrown in for excuses. They fight it out on the fringe of the nova, the captain gets his Illyrion, and what this does to the galactic economy we are not told. If we had been, it would have been all too obvious that the hero should have been strangled at birth. He's a near-psychopath in any case, and such sympathy as one can find for him is generated by the fact that his enemy is an all-time monster of plain and fancy nastiness.

Plot in general is not too important in a novel, being merely the string for the beads, so let's examine some of the beads, the details of the work.

The captain, Lorq Von Ray, surrounds himself with a crew of near-nuts, selected at random in the street of a city, for the whimsical reason that he had attempted the nova before with a highly trained crew and failed, and therefore proposes an unintegrated, untrained team for the next try. Playing whimsies within reach of a nova is a game for lunatics, but it gives Delany a chance to put together a collection of fantasy characters who can be depended upon to support the exotic atmosphere at the drop of an emotion.

The enemy, Prince Red (Prince is a christian name and is enough to show how far Delany is prepared to go to get his effects — his sister is Ruby Red) has a prosthetic arm which he uses early in the piece to carve up Lorq's face. For reasons mystically unexplained Lorq refuses to have his face repaired, and faces life as a more horrible Gully Foyle. (Possibly this represents the vow of the knight on quest — we get the Grail symbol later.)

Prince Red is involved in a never-stated but probably incestuous relationship with sister Ruby, who has a minor yen for Lorq but apparently a bigger one for big brother, and the rest of the cast is similarly off beat, each in his technicoloured, unlikely and unnecessary way.

Lorq and Prince have a few confrontations, in one of which Lorq avenges his face by slicing up Prince with a laser beam, leaving him as a bundle of hate supported in a tank of nutrient fluid. Then we take off for the nova, with the tank of nutrient fluid in implacable pursuit.

On the way, Lorq and the reader are treated to a lengthy interlude with a Tarot pack read by a member of the crew. This much-noticed section appears to have little purpose beyond casting a pseudo-mystic aura around the proceedings and to give Delany a chance to suggest that fortune-telling is a true science which only the intellectually blind cast doubt upon. More things in heaven and earth, Horatio! The ultimate effect is to forecast most of the ensuing plot at a point where any competent thriller writer would keep it to himself. On the mystic side we are also treated to some references to the Grail, as though the flight to the nova were a holy quest. (A little investigation of the Grail story might have put him off using it. Do you know what the single use of the Grail was, except as a symbol of purity? Read it up and find out — it's worth a laugh.)

Having got the mystical build-up behind us, we arrive on the fringes of the exploding star, where Lorq kills his enemy and so makes it possible for himself to collect his Illyrion and set about throwing the galaxy into chaos.

How he is able to collect it, by driving his ship *through* the centre of the nova, is the most marvellous piece of fantascientific effrontery since 'Doc' Smith postulated a planet in stable orbit around seventeen suns. Astrophysics, plasma physics, radiology and mathematics go out the observation port in order to make a cool hole in the centre of the star, and Lorq's ship happens to be moving at just the right angle to get through it. The hole is described as being large enough to permit the passage of 'a couple of Jupiters', which is a big hole — about 175,000 miles wide. But — a nova is apt to have a diameter of 300 million miles or better. Like to calculate the chances of hitting that hole at any respectable interstellar speed?

In this inferno Lorqu uses his *eyes* to look for the Illyrion. Since it would be in plasma form, despite some double talk of the centre of the nova being at only 6000 degrees, one wonders what he was looking for. Naturally he loses his sight.

And here we get some more wonderful SF reasoning. Crew member Katin — a characterless would-be artist-novelist in search of a theme — also takes a forbidden look at the nova at close range, but loses his sight only temporarily. The reason? *He* looked at it while they were moving *away* (Lorq looked while they were moving in) and the Doppler effect given by the ship's speed damped down the ultraviolet radiation which would have scarred his eyeballs. That the hard radiation present would have been similarly damped down into the UV spectrum is conveniently ignored.

And, incidentally, the flight through the nova is accomplished off stage, and so Delany passes up an opportunity for a piece of descriptive writing which somebody like Poul Anderson — whether you like him or not — would have brought off with panache and a due regard for scientific credibility.

Added up, *Nova* amounts to a wild and woolly, wickedly sadistic adventure yarn wherein all the insistent trickery in the typewriter cannot support the mysto-philosophic meanings too many reviewers have read into it, and which Delany no doubt intended them to find. It is plain fantasy, masquerading as super science, and even as fantasy it has no base in reality to allow the reader to identify with any character in it. Alfred Bester would have brought it off as a straight thriller with twice as much action and half as much nonsense and no overtones of quite absent deep meaning.

Make no mistake, Delany is a writer at heart, but works too hard at grandeur and the stunning effect. The most readable and best-handled passage in the book is the chapter concerning Lorq, Prince and Ruby as children, where his talent is not obscured by the monstrous and the overwhelming.

He has good SF in him, or perhaps good fantasy, but *Nova* is neither. It is empty.

It is a pity Delany has had so much to say about himself and his art in fanzines and other places, because he is not yet ready to do himself justice. Too much Delany and not enough artist; too much 'listen to this bit' and not enough to say; too much concentration on the big effect and not enough search for the proper vehicle for his undeniable talent. He could study Ursula Le Guin with profit. She gets twice the result with half the effort, and without mumbo-jumbo, and never for-

gets that she is writing about human beings. Which is why she deserved her awards.

With the air of fantasy rasping a little in my throat, I turned, with some misgiving, to *The Phoenix and the Mirror*, to discover

Avram Davidson playing it straight and cool

I love not second-rate fantasy or Avram Davidson, either, save in his occasional good moments, but his frolic with Vergil Magus in *The Phoenix and the Mirror* is wholly acceptable.

He stays within the limits of the legend which, in medieval times, clothed Vergil in the robe of a white magician and master of hidden arts, and offers no penny-a-line philosophy to make his tale suspect. His Vergil is not the poet and could never have produced an *Aeneid*. He is a more earthy character who might have managed the *Eclogues*, particularly the one wherein he is testy about having his property sequestered for the use of returned soldiers. And he is very much the Vergil of legend, with Roger Bacon's brazen head appropriated for good measure. Dante's Vergil perhaps.

Tantalisingly, Davidson never lets us know what century the tale is laid in. Doublets and hose are worn, Cyprus is still at its zenith, and the Roman Empire does not seem to have yet split into East and West; an emperor rules, but his name is never given. But in a fairy-tale world this is a minor irritation.

The plot is good, the style adequate without striving for archaism, and the characters recognisable as human beings. Also the conception of the Phoenix is unexpected and neatly turned. What more do you want for a few quiet hours of enjoyment without overblown pretension? It leaves sword-and-sorcery dead at the post.

Two anthologies

In between these noticeable novels I read a number of others not noticeable, neither good nor wholly bad, the middle-of-the-road stuff that is the backbone of genre writing; they need not delay us. In order not to neglect the short-story field, I invested in two anthologies.

The first was *Best SF Stories from New Worlds 5*. Let me be honest and admit that I didn't get through all of it. Such as I staggered through left me cold. These tales are of the essence of New Wavery, Moorcock version — stylistically exaggerated, vanishingly small in content, often obscure for obscurity's sake, often obscure for lack of a clearly conceived point, and all curiously *dated*. Time and again I was reminded of the literary experimentalism of the late 'twenties and found little that was not a reworking of those forgettable strivings. For those who luckily are too young to remember the late twenties, a typical tale of the time would have been one wherein two women stand in the street and talk moodily, significantly shifting from foot to foot once a page and occasionally easing the weight of their shopping baskets. At the end of talk about the weather and the old man's drunkenness, one would move tiredly into the nearest shop and the other disappear into the crowd. The reader, presumably, was left to ponder the whichness of

the whatness and extract some profound comment if he could. The stories in this volume are the modern SF equivalent of that happily dead product, differing mainly in their relentless use of the short, sharp sentence, which is designed to give urgency to the writing and all too often succeeds in reading like a shopping list. A whole article could well be given to the dissection of these tales, but they are hardly worth it.

The other volume was *The Year's Best Science Fiction No. 3*, collated and edited by Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison. Now there's an unlikely team! But the result is as good as you could wish for, and the stories are uniformly above average. They include three items from *New Worlds* which are significantly different from the Moorcock preferences. One is an unusually straightforward piece by J. G. Ballard, another is an equally straightforward piece which would be at home in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and the third is not a story at all, but a witty and entertaining psychologist's joke which is worth preserving. The *pièce de résistance* is 'Nine Lives' by Ursula Le Guin, who seems to do everything well; it deals with human cloning and concentrates on the psychological aspects rather than the obvious melodramatic possibilities. The whole book is highly recommendable.

What to do until the real thing comes along?

The effort to sum up impressions is not a simple one, for the field has developed a variety which makes summations doubtful and comparisons invidious. Reading back, I find the word 'pretentious' recurring, and this perhaps stays in mind as a major irritant. Of the eleven volumes surveyed, four were disfigured by pretentiousness, three of them irredeemably. Of the remainder two (the Vonnegut and the Dick) were enjoyable but suspect, three were acceptable on their own levels, one book of shorts had distinct class and one novel was, and in any year would have been, outstanding. Despite my rumblings and snarlings, statistically that makes the current scene look pretty good.

The inanities of critics, even the comparatively respectable ones, continue to jar, and the extracts selected by Ace Books for the blurbs of its Ace Specials series should be preserved in an anthology of nonsense. Why do these people who should, and I think do know better, hurl themselves into blind ecstasies at the commonplace and sometimes third rate? That most of them are themselves competent SF writers compounds the sin. As I asked earlier, what are they to do when the real thing comes along? They will have to invent new superlatives or strangle on their typewriter ribbons.

An appalling thought to finish with:

Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* has all the earmarks of a mainstream novel using the SF method merely as a framework. Perhaps with the advent of really good novelists the genre will disappear into the body of fiction.

Then everybody will be reading it and all excuse for fandom will have vanished!

— *SF Commentary* No. 17, November 1970

Because George often wrote severely about American, British and European science fiction, commentators fail to remember his staunch support for Australian science fiction writers and publications. Through workshops and letters, he gave much valuable advice to individual writers, and reviewed new Australian publications in *The Age* and elsewhere. In 1979 and 1981, he wrote two similar long accounts of Australian science fiction, which I've combined into one article, a necessary counterweight to recent Australian SF 'history' written from the limited viewpoint of the 1990s.

George and Australian Science Fiction

Science fiction in Australia:

A survey 1892–1980

Based on 'Science Fiction in Australia: A Complete Survey', *SF Commentary* 55/56, January–October 1979, and a paper delivered to the Conference on Speculative Fiction: The Australian Context, Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 18 July 1981

It is not my intention to discuss science fiction as such, but to trace the activities and influences that resulted in the present upsurge of science fiction writing in Australia.

Let me declare a stance: science fiction is to me just another aspect of fiction writing; I am not a genre devotee. My blood runs colder than that of the faithful who see science fiction hiding behind every published word.

To demonstrate at once: I will concentrate on writers who have functioned in the direct line of science-fictional descent, so there will be no more than passing mention of such as Dal Stivens, Frank Moorhouse, Peter Carey, Kenneth Cook and some others. Though their works are of interest to the science fiction reader, their fancies run closer to fantasy and the odd perspective. They have exerted little if any influence on today's Australian SF product. They may, of course, influence future writers, if only as stylists; I hope they will.

I regret also that although ANU's Dr Linebarger (Cordwainer Smith) used Australia in his tales, he did not write Australian science fiction. What he wrote belonged to himself alone. He was a subset of one. He left no descendants.

The story of Australian science fiction is not of steady advancement in writing and publishing tales and novels. Indeed, fiction plays only a holding role until about 1975. It is a story of aborted stirrings of publication, the rise of the intellectual fanzines, the Literature Board of the Australia Council, the visit of Ursula Le Guin and, at last, the production of some fiction fit to declare itself on the world scene.

Robert Potter: *The Germ Growers*

Science fiction as we understand it began in Australia, so far as I can discover, with the publication, in 1892, of a novel, *The Germ Growers* (Hutchinson, London), by Robert Potter.

Potter was, of all unlikelihoods, a canon of St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne. The story dealt with — hold your breath for it — germ warfare, mind control, invisibility, 'scientific' explanation of myths, secret enemies and UFOs. The science was godawful but the themes are still with us; since the 'science' of the modern versions is also usual godawful, what's new?

It made me no splash in the literary world, and the remaindered copies were given away as Divinity prizes. (I suspect a moral there, but it eludes me.)

The next name I can trace, the one who set my childish feet on the road to the bedlam of wonder, **Frank Russell**, *nom de plume* of a newspaper subeditor who wrote gadget SF for *Pals*, a boys' weekly modelled on the British *Chums* and *Boys' Own Paper*. At the age of nine I was hooked, forever.

Erle Cox: *Out of the Silence*

Another newspaperman (film critic, in this case), Erle Cox, sprang into prominence in the 1920s with *Out of the Silence*, a novel of prehistoric supermen revived in the present day. It was vaguely utopian and philosophic, mildly adventurous and stickily sentimental. By today's standards, it is hard to take, but it was a local bestseller, and was reprinted in America as late as 1932.

Cox also wrote a fantasy, *The Missing Angel*, and a

fringe SF novel on the coming world war. (It came.)

J. M. Walsh

Vandals of the Void
The Vanguard to Neptune
The Terror out of Space

The next name of importance is that of J. M. Walsh, an expatriate living in London. His *Vandals of the Void* appeared in *Wonder Stories Quarterly* for Summer 1931. It was good adventure SF for its day, and was followed by *The Vanguard to Neptune* and, under the pseudonym of H. Haverstock Hill, *The Terror out of Space* (*Amazing Stories*, February–March 1934).

As a successful thriller writer, probably he found that SF did not pay, and wrote little more of it.

M. Barnard Eldershaw:

Tomorrow and Tomorrow [and Tomorrow]

In 1947 appeared the most important novel in Australian SF to this day, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* [reprinted in 1983 under its original name *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, with all wartime-censored material restored] by ‘M. Barnard Eldershaw’, the penname of Marjorie Barnard and Florence Eldershaw, novelists and historians. It was a considerable critical success, and has achieved the status of a minor classic in Australian literature.

Written in the days when style and literacy were demanded and appreciated, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* was a study of late-Depression and wartime Sydney from a viewpoint four centuries in the future. Its ideas have been superseded, but it remains a beautiful novel.

The embargo

When World War II broke out, unnecessary imports were banned; science fiction almost vanished from our lives. I know — I was there. It was a young person’s passion in those days, but for five years the young with busy with more urgent affairs. But wars end, and the teenagers of 1939 were the young men of the not-so-brave new world, ready to exchange austerity for dreams.

But SF dreams were not easily available. The import embargo was not finally lifted until 1959; until then a few American, and later English, magazines filtered through to us, but that was all.

But there was a demand. So, in the early 1950s, Atlas Publications in Melbourne and Page Publications in Sydney issued pica-print magazines — *Science Fiction Monthly*, *Future Science Fiction*, etc. — reprinting American SF of mostly prewar vintage. A few locally written contributions were American in style and content, and why not? What other teachers did they have?

Vol Molesworth, Currawong Press and Futurian Press

There was also a minor phenomenon called Vol (for Voltaire) Molesworth, who had written by 1950 ten novels in four years for the Currawong Press, and he, being a journalist by profession, left us some account of this period. When he died, young, in 1963 he left behind *A History of Australian Fandom, 1935–1963*, which has been issued in a very readable duplicated edition by Ron Clarke of Faulconbridge, NSW. It is a history of fandom

rather than the printed literature, but salient facts can be extracted and a picture of the era formed. Interested parties should possess themselves of this book, which is written in cold blood and with no misplaced love. His account of fandom is a Lilliputian Wars of the Roses.

Molesworth wrote altogether a dozen novels and spurred on other writers, but what he wrote is preserved only on the shelves of middle-aging enthusiasts, and there is little reason to remember it. It was poor stuff, following the pulp models of the day, but what matters is that it was written at all.

He tells how the Futurian Society — a Sydney fan club still in existence — founded the Futurian Press in 1948, and 1951 published Molesworth’s *Blinded They Fly* and a collaborative novel by Graham Stone and Royce Williams, *Zero Equals Nothing*. He recalls that each was ‘well received by the press’ but does not tell us where the reviews appeared or what they in fact said. Then, in 1952, after the publication of Molesworth’s final novel, *Let There Be Monsters*, a brief note appears: ‘As both Vol Molesworth and Royce Williams would be occupied with study, it was decided to close down Futurian Press.’

‘Close down.’ One senses a dream dying as two young men forsake visions for reality. There was, it seems, no one to take over from them.

Thrills, Inc.

But a monthly magazine called *Thrills Inc.*, featuring locally written SF, had appeared, and here is Molesworth’s comment: ‘This was a science adventure publication which was hailed in some quarters as Australia’s first prozine, in others condemned as juvenile.’

And ‘juvenile’ it was, even for those undemanding days. Here is a sample of the style: ‘His muscles were like tangled, twisted rope. He couldn’t even move! A high-pitched scream of terror sounded faintly in his ears and it cut through the fog of weariness like a clean, sharp knife. With a strength he did not know he possessed he climbed to his feet.’

Immovable muscles and all . . .

The stories were signed by Ace Carter, Rick Harte, Wolfe Herscholt and so on, house names or *noms de plume* — and in view of the reports of plagiarism and outright theft this was probably as well. I cannot confirm the reports, but fan survivors of the period swear to them. *Thrills Inc.* ran for 23 issues and died, apparently unlamented.

Doug Nicholson’s Forerunner

In 1953 fan Doug Nicholson, of Sydney, tried to plug the gap with *Forerunner*, described as ‘a magazine of indefinite size and frequency’ — how ineradicably fan-ish that sounds — ‘designed to pave the way for a professional, adult Australian science fiction magazine’. Laudable, laudable. It lasted for two issues.

So the 1950s was a decade of starts and stops. There was no public for science fiction on a popular scale. Australia had neither the population nor the interest to support regular publication.

Early Frank Bryning and Wynne Whiteford

But something was happening outside the fan enthusiasms and the rip-off magazines. Despite the popular theory that in the fifties science fiction was despised by

the intelligent and the reputable, the *Australian Journal* and the *Australian Magazine*— both reputable, staid and middle of the road — published a few science fiction stories.

Between 1952 and 1954 they published stories by the only writers of the period who are still with us today — Frank Bryning and Wynne Whiteford. These two alone represent continuity in this spasmodic history.

Early A. Bertram Chandler

One other lonely figure, utterly divorced from the local scene, surfaced at some time during this period. His work had appeared in Campbell's *Astounding* since 1944, he had published a few stories in Australia as 'Arthur Dunstan', and was later to have command in the Australian Merchant Marine and become an Australian citizen. It is not easy to pinpoint just when he became identified with Australian science fiction, but A. Bertram Chandler is of course the most prolific and best known of all Australian science fiction writers. And, despite his English origins, his work was until the last few years the most consistently Australian in atmosphere and content of any produced in this country.

Nevil Shute: *In the Wet* and *On the Beach*

One other writer of the 1950s must be mentioned, another Englishman: Nevil Shute. Two of his novels, written after he became a permanent resident here, were *In the Wet* (1953) — an idealised vision of Australia in 2000 AD (alas for the vision) — and *On the Beach* (1957) — a requiem for a planet dying under nuclear fallout. He left no science fiction descendants of any note; he was primarily interested in people rather than the spectacular genre trappings, and both these books were really of what science fiction fans call, with such self-conscious snobbery, 'the mainstream'. As though science fiction ever really forsook the mainstream of fiction! Shute warrants a historical mention, if only for his immense popularity with the general reader, but the science fiction genre, at that time immersed in super-science and ESP, was not much interested.

So the fifties came in with hope, noise and bustle, and went out in near silence. Australian science fiction lacked stamina, talent and a public. It belonged to fandom, noisy but impotent.

The beginning of the 1960s:

***New Worlds* and early Lee Harding, John Baxter, David Boutland and Damien Broderick**

The 1960s started slowly but aimed for a higher level of literacy. In the beginning Bryning and Whiteford continued to publish in British and American magazines, and in 1961 young 'John Grimes' was born to a very minor role in Chandler's *The Rim of Space*, published by Ace in America. It was 1967 before he achieved stardom in *The Road to the Rim* and began his career in one of the longest-running series— sagas of science fiction.

This was not enough. The post-war amateurs had had their day, and new blood was required; simply following the American lead had paid no dividends. The first new names signal at once to the present day.

In 1961 **Lee Harding** placed a story in E. J. Carnell's



Wynne Whiteford, mid 1970s (George Turner Estate collection)

British *Science Fantasy*. It was called 'Displaced Person'. A touch of precog, do you think?

Then, in 1962, **John Baxter** sold his first story to *Science Fiction Adventures*.

David Rome — real name David Boutland — was also selling to Carnell at this time. Eventually Rome wrote one novel — for the Australian paperback firm of Horwitz — called *Squat*. Horwitz subtitled it 'Sexual Adventures on Other Planets', on the understanding that publisher and writer have to live, and sex is always in fashion. Rome finally defected to TV script writing.

Another up-and-coming young buck of the period was placing an occasional science fiction story with *Man Junior* and *Man*, of which he later became an editor. These tales and some others were collected into a 1965 volume for Horwitz as *A Man Returned*. It is a long stride from there to the sophisticated **Damien Broderick** of today, but he is recognisably present.

John Baxter: Early novels and *The Pacific Book of Australian Science Fiction*

These writers signalled an improvement in style and a movement away from overseas models. At the same time others were writing more hopefully than successfully, but the major figure of the decade is probably John Baxter, though not entirely for his writing. His published stories were a little better than the Australian science fiction average and he wrote two novels for Horwitz, *The God Killers* and *The Offworlders*. These are buried in the files of forgotten fiction, but his real achievement is the first halfway decent anthology of Australian science fiction to see print. In 1968 he selected for Angus & Robertson the contents of *The Pacific Book of Australian Science Fiction*.

Bill Noonan, for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, gave it a good review. I was less kind in Bruce Gillespie's *SF Commentary*.

Rereading that review, I see no reason to modify my comments, but today I would handle it differently. I was new to reviewing, and still practised criticism as a mode of head-on collision. (If this sounds like a digression, it is not. It is the first intimation that criticism is closely bound to the history of Australian science fiction and



John Bangsund and John Foyster, 1982 (Photo: Elaine Cochrane)

plays a role in this outline.) As a critic, I lacked then the overall view of the local scene that would have dictated a gentler approach.

I dealt with Baxter's selection on the ground that it must measure up to good literary standards, or fail. I still say it failed. I also say that it displayed the seeds of progress, and that it was I who failed to note their germination. The book was a popular success, becoming a collector's item in England and America, and must have been a great stimulus to those local writers with stories aborning and no home for them in their own country. Baxter produced a *Second Pacific Book of Australian Science Fiction* in 1971, but we will come to that in its place. For the moment he had made his mark. Eventually he went to England and turned to other related areas, mainly film, which do not fit our Australian concern.

John Bangsund's *Australian Science Fiction Review*

In the second half of the sixties a product of the fannish can of worms came to sudden authority. The dreaded fanzine left the compost heap and invaded the drawing room. John Bangsund of Melbourne began publishing *Australian Science Fiction Review*, and this, with the Angus & Robertson publication of the *Pacific Book*, shifted the focus from Sydney to Melbourne. An entirely fresh winding up began.

ASFR, as Bangsund's magazine became known, appeared in 1966 and, almost overnight, brought a measure of literary grace to the humble fanzine. Bangsund is himself a belletrist of some individual quality, and he extracted better work from his contributors than some of them realised was in them. Harding and Broderick were present from the start; also John Foyster and a brash young Rob Gerrand, who was destined to rise through the ranks. *ASFR* attracted attention overseas and soon featured articles and letters from such a purist as James Blish, as well as from Michael Moorcock and Brian Aldiss, who were busily breaking the New Wave in Britain.

The crown of the *ASFR* career was an anniversary issue that carried a few pieces of fiction, including a story, 'The Left Hand Way', by Bert Chandler. This comedy of the Buddhist robot who unscrewed his navel later found a place in the Aldiss and Harrison *Best of the Year* collection. Quite a coup for a fan publisher.

But Bangsund's real claim to distinction rests on his

magazine's influence on local fanzine criticism. His contributors wrote with some panache and an insight which, if not deep, put to shame the bleating in other fanzines. His example fired others to scan more closely what they read and to write more intelligently about it. Which was, of course, a long step towards demanding better fiction.

Bruce Gillespie's *SF Commentary*

By 1969 *ASFR* was losing steam as Bangsund became interested in other forms of expression. There was room for another quality fanzine, and Bruce Gillespie's *SF Commentary* was the answer — and still is. Broderick, Foyster and Gerrand made the transition to *SFC*; overseas writers sent letters and articles; even Stanislaw Lem and his combative agent, Franz Rottensteiner, made regular appearances. These were heady days for a local boy making his mark.

John Foyster and other critics

Despite the contributions of the masters, the most influential name in local criticism was that of John Foyster. Foyster could not be called a sparkling critic; he wrote seriously of serious matters, wrestling for clarity of expression, and reserved sparkle for frothier items (such as uninhibited attacks on convention committees). But he was and is a critic of discernment and taste, and he impressed these on *SF Commentary*. By the end of the decade local critics were taking more responsible attitudes towards their addiction; the old days of 'characterisation, plot and background', straight from fourth-form English, were over; the new reviewers hacked, however ineptly, at genesis and meaning, at relationship to a writer's *oeuvre*, at nuance of word and thought. They distinguished wit from humour and characterisation from the mere fixing of identity tags. This was the work of many minds, but without Bangsund's ebullience, Foyster's insistence on quality and Gillespie's own increasingly perceptive reviewing, the age of informed local criticism might have been longer delayed. One wishes that some critics in the national dailies and monthlies might take note.

Ron Graham's *Vision of Tomorrow*

One last fling of the sixties remains to wonder at — the gallant but confused *Vision of Tomorrow*.

Ron Graham was a retired engineer, a businessman and a life-long science fiction addict — and he wanted to produce a science fiction magazine. He was astute enough to see that Australian *quality* production on a commercial scale was impracticable, so he determined on English publication with a fiction content roughly 50 per cent British, 40 per cent Australian and 10 per cent European. At which point his astuteness left him.

He took as editor a prominent but inexperienced English fan, Philip Harbottle, who rapidly became lost in the problems of editing and — most importantly — distribution. After eleven financially calamitous issues, in November 1970 *Vision of Tomorrow* failed for good.

Aside from Graham's ignorance of the business side of the trade, he interfered with the running of the magazine. He insisted on reprinting the works of a deceased English hack, John Russell Fearn, whose out-

put he prized above rubies. We will never know why. This fannish attitude towards selection, together with autocratic ownership stances, led to a rift with his first Australian co-editor, John Bangsund, and with myself, who should have been writing a review column for him. In fact I wrote nothing, and John Foyster took over the column.

In its short life, *Vision of Tomorrow* had its triumphs, including a first English translation of any story by Stanislaw Lem, 'Are You Listening, Mr Jones?' Familiar Australian names figured — Harding, Broderick, Wodhams, Baxter and some others. Some covers were painted by a Sydney artist, Stanley Pitt. Overall, however, the contents were run-of-the-mill stuff, and human frailty stood in the way of improvement. A fondness for science fiction confers no ability to judge, edit and publish it.

So far Australian science fiction another decade died in failure. It had so far displayed neither quality nor staying power, and had been kept alive by a few writers and small entrepreneurs, whose creativity was strangled by isolation and the lack of hard-edged criticism. The improving criticism was still too indulgent.

John Baxter's

Second Pacific Book of Australian Science Fiction

The first years of the 1970s produced only one publication of note: John Baxter's *The Second Pacific Book of Australian Science Fiction*, in 1971.

The Introduction opened thus: 'To have edited one collection of Australian Science Fiction, Lady Bracknell might have said, is understandable, but to edit a second looks like sheer insanity.' Retrospective qualms over the first book were justified, but he needed have no fears for the second. With Olaf Ruhen, George Johnston and Michael Wilding in the Contents list, quality was assured. Among the contribution of the old and tried was 'Dancing Gerontius', by which a younger Lee Harding is remembered. The overall quality is commendable and, interestingly, he included a hundred or so lines from Douglas Stewart's poem 'Rutherford'. If he intended to indicate by this science fiction's penetration of more aristocratic areas of literature, he was less than just to aristocracy and Douglas Steart, but he did demonstrate that the interests of science fiction need not be divorced from fine literature. In the critical atmosphere of ten years ago, that was worth doing.

The *Second Book* was as successful as the first — and that was that. Aside from occasional tales published overseas by Broderick, Harding, Whiteford, etc. there was only silence on the science-fictional front.

1975: *annus mirabilis*

Then, in 1975, five events occurred in a matter of months:

- Australia held its first World Science Fiction Convention, in Melbourne.
- The Literature Board of the Australia Council began to take interest in the development of imaginative writing as exemplified by science fiction.
- Ursula Le Guin ran a science fiction writers' workshop in Melbourne.
- Paul Collins began publication of a science fiction magazine.



Bruce Gillespie and Carey Handfield, 1975 (Photo: George Turner Estate collection)

- Norstrilia Press was founded by Bruce Gillespie and Carey Handfield.

I propose to deal with each of these events separately, and to suggest that all the results of these activities have not been fully evaluated yet.

Aussiecon I

The convention known as Aussiecon was a fan's delight. Bobbysockers from twelve to seventy oohed and aahed and rarely realised that their visiting writer-idols were mostly practised performers who knew what their public wanted and gave it to them. The reality of these people they never saw — or wanted to see. This exposure to the science-fictional great proved less than a total blessing in following years.

Aussiecon, *per se*, contributed nothing to the furtherance of Australian science fiction. As one journalist noted, it consisted of people exchanging the excited equivalent of 'I like it — don't you?' Who attended for enlightenment remained in darkness.

The Ursula Le Guin Writers' Workshop

But there were side issues that finally overshadowed the light shows and idol worship. The fundamental one was that the convention committee applied for financial assistance to the Literature Board, and got it. This money — \$2000, I believe — helped them to bring Ursula Le Guin to Australia as Guest of Honour, and thereby to fire more opening shots than they could have imagined.

So let us look at what Le Guin began.

Ursula Le Guin did not *agree* to run a science fiction writers' workshop; she *suggested* it. And thereby justified the Literature Board's \$2000. The workshop lasted only one week, but its effect on local science fiction writing was electric. Of the nineteen attendees, only one had published professionally before. At least seven have done so since with some regularity, and possibly others I am unaware of.

I visited that Workshop, in the hills outside Melbourne, as an observer for one morning only, and Bruce Gillespie handed me a typescript headed 'The Ins and Outs of the Hadhya City State', by someone called Philippa C. Maddern. By the bottom of page 2, I knew that here was the kind of talent Australian SF needed — that at least one up-and-coming writer was already born.

If the discovery of that workshop was Philippa Maddern, its great effect was to turn the writers' eyes away

from imitation and inward to their own needs, desires and fantasies. That Le Guin combined in herself the virtues of artist, exemplar, leader and teacher was our great fortune.

There has been argument as to whether these workshops have positive value; strangely, it is the non-writers who remain unconvinced. Perhaps yes, perhaps no, but I state a personal conviction that Le Guin's Workshop kicked half a dozen new writers into confined action. What would have been enough, but it inspired others to repeat the performance. (It also produced an anthology of the attendees' work, but that belongs to the history of Norstrilia Press.)

Later workshops

Kitty Vigo organised a second workshop at Monash University in 1977. Vonda McIntyre and Christopher Priest were imported as class leaders, each taking a week, with myself leading the middle week. I think it was a useful venture, and it called forth a respectable anthology from the attendees. It did not reproduce the spectacular results of the first, if only because none of us three leaders was an electrifying Le Guin.

Later I worked on a small workshop in Adelaide and on another in Sydney with Terry Carr from California, organised by Petrina Smith, who had been at both earlier Workshops.

Perhaps the workshop idea had gone as far as we could take it without massive funding; they are not cheap to run. Perhaps, having launched a small group of fair quality, we had run out of base material, or perhaps simply out of drive. There are those — like John Foyster and Merv Binns — who feel that a new direction in workshop activity is needed.

Paul Collins and Void Publications

Among the phenomena — and that is the correct word — of 1975 was Paul Collins. Not then known in science fiction circles, he decided to launch a science fiction magazine. And did so. Just like that.

The magazine, *Void*, launched its first issue to coincide with Aussiecon. Paul Collins seemed to have managed everything singlehanded except the actual writing and illustrating. We all said, 'Paul, it's awful; the stories are bad, the editing is bad, the presentation is bad, and you'll go broke.'

Well, we were half right — all these things were bad, but they improved with practice and Paul didn't go broke (I suspect it was a narrow squeeze at times). He even managed to persuade the Literature Board of the Australia Council to give a little cash to help with costs. He published stories by Wynne Whiteford, Bert Chandler, Lee Harding, Van Ikin, Frank Bryning, David Grigg, Rob Gerrand, Jack Wodhams, Bruce Barnes, John Alderson, David Lake and many others.

Void lasted five issues. And collapsed? Not on your nelly! Paul simply shifted gears and went into hardcover publishing. He switched to an anthology format. In 1977 he published a volume of original, mostly Australian-authored stories entitled *Envisaged Worlds*. He followed it with *Other Worlds* and *Alien Worlds*, and, in 1980, a clutch of three novels authored by David Lake, Wynne Whiteford and Jack Wodhams. Collins's has always been a shoestring operation, with Literature

Board assistance important to its survival. Most of his material has been locally written, and includes fantasy and sword-and-sorcery tales as well as rather unadventurous middle-of-the-road science fiction. Opinion varies widely as to the quality of the material, but he has tapped a willing readership, perhaps unsophisticated and uncritical, but happily loyal. He is filling a gap and paying his writers.

His was not the only small-magazine venture of the time, but is the only one to have stayed alive. The others were really fan-fiction efforts that lasted a few issues on little more than their publishers' courage, and had no discernible effect on the body of Australian science fiction.

Peter Knox and Boggle

As if it were not enough that one starry-eyed innocent should brave the dreaded Australian magazine trade, another struck his hopeful head out in Sydney. In 1977, Peter Knox flung caution and commonsense to the winds and produced the first issue of *Boggle*. If, like me, you find the title a mite disconcerting, rest assured that there are people who like it and race to its defence at the faintest hint of criticism.

Peter's writers were drawn from much the same list as Paul's, with a few fresh names. He also applied for Literature Board assistance, but did not get it, so his publication has been entirely self financed. The man just has to be a closet millionaire, out of his mind, or a Dedicated Fan Doing His Bit For Science Fiction. I think it's the last because, in spite of setbacks and disappointments, he is still producing.

The original plan for four issues a year failed, as such plans do in the most professionally backed and funded organisations; to date, only three issues have appeared, but a fourth is on the way.

Let me quote from Peter's answer to my request for details:

When I took it (no. 4) to my usual printer for a quote (on a much later issue) I was thrown figures like \$1000. After much dealing with Fate, I found myself the proud owner of a secondhand offset printing machine. (Logic: I bought it for \$1000.) The bloody thing was more trouble than it was worth, and it died of natural causes a few months later with the issue still unfinished. Fate stepped in again (the Jester) and I found myself the proud owner of a *brand new* printing machine and a printing business . . . I still own the printing machine, the business is defunct, and I'm trying desperately to finish printing *Boggle* from my laundry at home. I'm a dill, but I believe in this bloody thing! *There will be future issues.*

The mind Boggles.

Here is a further quotation on Peter's policy and aims which, unless I'm badly off beam, pretty well represents Paul Collins's experience and ideas as well:

Boggle is subtitled 'A Forum for the Development of Australasian Science Fiction Writing', and is here to help the unknowns in the field. I've been in lots of trouble with some of the SF critics for what they term my 'publication at any price' policy, but I firmly

believe there is an Australian *writing* scene to be uncovered. Rough as guts at the moment . . . but here just the same . . . I'll be the first to admit that my contributors have a long way to go. Nobody was willing to start a magazine because the standard of writing wasn't up to publication . . . It may be some time before *Boggle* can boast world-standard content, but at least it's bought a ticket, and without one there's no hope of winning the lottery (old Australian folk tale).

Norstrilia Press

A seminal event of 1975 was the founding, by Bruce Gillespie and Carey Handfield, of Norstrilia Press — which took its name from the tales of the American professor best known as Cordwainer Smith — Paul Linebarger.

The original purpose of the press was to preserve essays from *SF Commentary*, and the first work issued did just that. *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd* was the first professionally produced book of science fiction criticism published in Australia. It was decked out with a bibliography, an index, an introduction by Roger Zelazny, and an intriguingly eerie wraparound cover executed by the talented Irene Pagram. The articles included three of Bruce's own reverent salaams to his favourite author (and why not?), together with Stanislaw Lem's ill-tempered and, I think, ill-advised attack on western SF, which Bruce appears to have permitted because Philip Dick alone was excepted from universal excoriation.

Unlike most symposia on a single author, it was not wholly devoted to adulation; the editor called in George Turner as Devil's Advocate for some hypothetical anti-Dick section. He always seems to get the villain roles.

This original purpose sank without trace when Le Guin's Workshop had an anthology for publication, and who better to do it than Norstrilia Press, whose staff of two had been closely involved in organising the workshop? So, in 1976 *The Altered I* appeared, with Lee Harding as editor. The book was a success and the American rights were sold. The Monash Workshop book, *The View from the Edge*, appeared the following year, but was not a money-spinner. The market for such specialised volumes is not large, and it lacked the magical name of Le Guin.

This was 1977, the year in which Rob Gerrand joined the firm.

Since then the press has published Keith Antill's novel, *Moon in the Ground*, and Damien Broderick's *The Dreaming Dragons*. Aside from fiction, the press has published Roger Zelazny's madly titled poems, *When Pussy Willows Last in the Catyard Bloomed*, and a collection of original essays, *The Stellar Gauge*, edited by Michael Tolley and Kirpal Singh, and featuring both Australian and overseas writers.

Rob Gerrand's *Transmutations*

An odd departure was a joint venture with Outback Press to publish Rob Gerrand's anthology *Transmutations*. This book illustrates both the strengths and the weaknesses of the local scene and forms a useful compendium of our newer writers' science-fictional outlook at the time. Gerrand also added a footnote to history by

bouncing a story by Brian Aldiss, after which piece of *lèse-majesté* he demanded that Aldiss write a Foreword for him. Which Aldiss did. It's a friendly world.

If Paul Collins has his sights on the popular market, Norstrilia Press has more basic concerns. One may not agree with all that the firm has done, but its managers have displayed the courage of their convictions, and six years later they are still with us and planning new books.

Two very different publishers signal a future for the locally written genre.

The role of the Literature Board

It is still too early to assess the impact of Literature Board funding on Australian science fiction, but I suggest that, given the existence of latent creativity, the Literature Board provided a detonator. Ursula Le Guin was the spark, but Literature Board money made the explosion possible. Success of the Le Guin visit meant that future conventions must have their overseas stars, and Literature Board money was again crucial for many of these expensive imports. A question arose from responsible minds: did results justify such use of the public purse?

Le Guin was certainly a bargain; McIntyre, Priest and Carr paid workshop dividends, and Aldiss did a dutiful round of academic venues, but the value to science fiction of other visitors is doubtful. Fans touched the hems of the garments of the great, but in useful terms the great had nothing to offer but their sometimes vapid presences. Add to this that the Board had funded a few publishers to issue second-rate science fiction that fell deservedly dead on the market, and some of us were uneasy as to just how much the Board members knew about the genre.

So I wrote to Nancy Keesing, who was a member of the Board in 1975, and asked a careful question: 'Did the Board realise that it was funding a genre or did it simply decide that this or that project deserved funding as an individual effort?'

With her permission I quote a few paragraphs of her answer:

'SF is not a form of fiction that greatly appeals to me. However, when I edited *The Australian Author* from about 1970 to 1974 I became very much aware of local interest in SF and fantasy. Some of my education came from Dal Stivens and Bert Chandler, but it was John Bangsund who chiefly gained my interest and who plied me with various fanzines. When the applications for the Convention and Le Guin's visit came before the Board I did wonder whether any other member knew about this local interest, and distributed my magazines and materials to members — also, to the best of my ability, other verbal background. Those members with a particular interest in children's literature were, of course, aware of Le Guin anyway. The Board, of course, did have reports and was aware of the great success of this funding. I should add that the Board then, and I am sure now, when assessing applications about which it is not expert within its own ranks seeks outside opinion. However, I know that for the last few years at least, one Board member has had a particular interest in science fiction.'

Plainly, the Board *was* informed, though one would dearly like to know who provided some of the 'outside opinion'. But one must be prepared to admit that their

opinions may have been as firmly based as one's own, and here I am uneasily aware of being in the cone of my own fire; I too was funded for twelve months to write a science fiction novel; I also edited *The View from the Edge*, which was in part subsidised by the Board.

But opinion within the ranks has been divided over the funding of some Paul Collins volumes. No final assessment is possible, but there can be little doubt that Gerrard's *Transmutations* made a showcase for newer Australian writers, and it would be hard to object to the assistance given for Broderick's *The Dreaming Dragons*. The Literature Board's backing of conventions, publishers and writers has been vital to the emergence of a viable Australian science fiction — which makes a wide, wide hole in that theory, still cherished in the science fiction ghettos, that the ivory-tower *littérateurs* have only contempt for the genre.

University clubs

Since 1976 we have been consolidating, and I propose to look quickly at some activities that seem to have positive value for the genre, and then at the writers who represented the vanguard of our science fiction in 1980.

One almost underground activity has become apparent. The science fiction clubs on various university campuses published fiction magazines; I am aware of three such, and there may be others. Without pretension, they serve a breeding-ground function, and have fostered such writers as David Grigg, Francis Payne and Albert Vann, all promising talents. Their contribution has been unsung but practical.

Yggdrasil

In 1969, David Grigg instituted *Yggdrasil* as the magazine of the newly formed Melbourne University Science Fiction Association. It was also David's personal magazine for a year or two.

In 1973, *Yggdrasil* turned more and more to publishing fiction. (Charles Taylor was the editor that year.) This trend was made official in 1974, and the institution of the club's Shaky Leaf Award for the best item of fiction published during the year.

Francis Payne usually does well in the Shaky Leaf competition, and from MUSFA he springs to mind at once as a writer of considerable promise.

Van Ikin's *Enigma* and *Science Fiction*

At the University of Sydney, Leith Morton (now a lecturer in Oriental Studies, but then a student on campus) conceived *Enigma* as the magazine of the Sydney University SF Association, and the first number appeared in 1970. Its print run, averaging 450, continued under the editorship of Van Ikin.

Van suggests that, over the years, Stephen Hitchings and Rick Kennett have shown the kind of talent we may hear more of. Of artwork, of which *Enigma* features a fair quantity, he says, 'Our major contribution may be in the field of artwork, where we have introduced Dane Ikin, Nick Stathopoulos, Michael Kumashov, and . . . Mike McGann to the world. In time to come, this might prove to be our most valuable contribution.'

However, Van Ikin — now Dr Ikin — threw his metaphorical hat into the ring in 1977 with Volume 1, Number 1 of *Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Litera-*

ture. This was not a club production but a personal venture. As a review it suffered from patchiness inevitable in building up a connection of competent contributors, but its basis was always sound.

For example, No. 3 (to hand in 1979) ran to 154 pages. It contained an author-interview, verse by Bob Beale and Roger Zelazny (snared, no doubt, while he was in Australia in 1978), artwork by Van's brother Dane Ikin, some solid reviewing, an editorial and a letter section, two fiction items (one by opposition editor Peter Knox), and Terry Dowling's 28,000-word (I kid you not) article on Jack Vance. The article is illustrated with a portfolio of Vanciful creatures by Geoff Pollard. This piece, 'The Art of Xerography', has been sold to a US publisher for a book of essays on Vance, so the tentacles are reaching out.

This is a professional product. It took either courage or touching faith to start it in a country whose 'establishment' is not anti-SF, but very wary of it. That it flourishes after four years and a transfer to Perth speaks for a readership prepared to take its science fiction seriously. It covers peripheral as well as central issues, and may well become a valuable repository of current thinking about the genre in Australia.

Other fiction magazines

Fiction magazine publishing has again come to the fore in the past two or three years. How many periodicals exist is hard to say, since distribution is largely by subscription, but I can cite *Cygnus Chronicle*, *Omicron*, *Futuristic Adventures*, *Crux* and *Nexus*. They are best described as fan fiction publications, but one of them, *Cygnus Chronicle*, has some sense of style. Given support, it has potential for professionalism, thereby to become an outlet for up-and-coming young writers.

The newer writers

The group of such writers is not large, but it forms the base on which a future Australian science fiction may rest. Such people as Petrina Smith, Bruce Gillespie, Randal Flynn, Van Ikin, Marilyn Fate, David King and Leanne Frahm show obvious potential.

Philippa Maddern

Philippa Maddern sprang like Athene, full grown and fully armed, though I don't know from whose head. She entered the scene at the Le Guin Workshop with a story so confidently professional as to knock the complacency out of all present. She has written only a handful of tales since, being busy about an Oxford degree, but each one has been original and individual and has found a ready market.

The prime characteristic of Philippa's work is an ability to express a complex situation in remarkably compact prose that is still perfectly clear and informed with literary grace. While still feeling her way as a stylist, she shows a sureness of technique many older hands might envy. She writes for herself, has no hesitation about saying no to editors who want changes (but makes them quickly and accurately when she sees the need), and has so far rejected my plea that she try her hand at a novel. 'Not ready,' says Philippa. when she is, watch out!

David Lake

David Lake sprang fully armed, not from the head of Zeus but from DAW Books, with a novel, *Walkers on the Sky*, the first of a series of five. Others include *The Right Hand of Dextra*, *The Wildlings of Westron* and *The Gods of Xuma*.

These novels are complex in conception, though fairly simple in structure, and are basically adventure stories in an SF ambience, though informed with an intellectualism that is not pushed too hard. The writing is less individual, more middle of the road, than might be expected of Lake's academic background.

His short story 'Re-deem the Time', in *Rooms of Paradise*, is a neat inversion of the time-travel theme, confirming the fertility of his imagination.

When David Lake's first work first appeared in America, the very patrician John Clute, writing for *Foundation*, wrote: 'In the space of only a year David Lake has established himself as a newcomer of considerable note.' From Clute that is almost an accolade. Lake's short stories are more delicately textured than his novels and have formed the backbones of several Australian anthologies. We look to him for a great deal in the future.

Cherry Wilder

Cherry Wilder also made her name overseas with her 'Brin' novels, but has not forgotten the homeland; she has recently published with Paul Collins and the *Cygnus Chronicle*. She lives in Germany and carries a New Zealand passport, but cannot yet be considered a deserter.

Her first published SF story was 'The Ark of James Carlyle' (*New Writings*), which Lee Harding snapped up for reprint in *Beyond Tomorrow*.

The most recent I have read is 'The Falldown of Man', especially written for Lee's *Rooms of Paradise* collection. Another story, 'Odd Man Search', turns up in Paul Collins's *Alien Worlds*.

Cherry Wilder writes with a smooth intimacy which imposes itself on the reader without bludgeoning him with the overblown and wildly *outré*, and has an acute sense of character that renders her prose lively in essence, even when activity is not her concern. Her writing has also that indefinable quality, 'charm', which I do not know how to assess and discuss.

David Grigg

David Grigg is a quiet Melbourne man with a deep interest in the sciences, who goes quietly about his business without making large waves or being washed over by them.

His first published story was 'Deep Freeze' (Britain's *Science Fiction Monthly*, 1975), and 'To Speak of Many Things' appeared in the American *Galileo* magazine. Lee Harding swept up his 'A Song Before Sunset' for *Beyond Tomorrow*, he contributed three items to *The Altered I*, and one to *Envisaged Worlds*, and has another in Rob Gerrand's *Transmutations*.

David also did two of those difficult little works for the Cassell remedial-reading set, *Halfway House* and *Shadows*.

David has not produced a great deal, but has shown steady improvement; he is one of our probable future stars.

The senior writers

A. Bertram Chandler

If we had a chapter to elect a Dean of Australian SF, A. Bertram (Bert) Chandler would take the position unopposed. Yes, yes, I know he is English born, allowing you to claim at least a part of the action, but he is an Australian citizen these days, living in Sydney.

His record in SF is solid. His first short story, 'This Means War!', appeared in *Astounding* for May 1944, and probably only Bert knows how many there have been since. He has published 33 novels; there are two more in the publishers' hands, and another in the typewriter. Many SF writers have produced vastly more in a similar period, but few have been so consistent in quality. I can recall only two novels that seem to me to have fallen below the Chandler standard, and there are few prolific writers of whom as much can be said.

Bert is best known as the creator of Commodore Grimes — or whatever his rank in the latest novel, *Matilda's Stepchildren* — but he has produced sixteen other novels as well, among the least known of which is his flirtation with John Russell Fearn's Golden Amazon. Fearn wrote a series of Golden Amazon novels for the *Toronto Star*. The paper wished to continue with the popular character after his death, and asked Bert to do another GA story.

Bert, who detested the character, accepted in a try-anything-once spirit, but soon found he couldn't deal with the impossible woman; so he had her brainwashed, and the psychologically reoriented lady reappeared as the Empress Irene in *Empress of Outer Space*. The *Toronto Star* felt, perhaps, that some sleight of typewriter had been worked on them, and the relationship lapsed. The novel was published as half of an Ace Double, with *The Alternate Martians*, in 1965.

But Bert has always been happiest with Grimes and the Rim Worlds. (He once did an autobiographical piece for John Bangsund, who published it as 'My Life and Grimes'.) It has long been a friendly joke that Bert writes about ocean-going spaceships or space-going liners; he accepts it philosophically. But what would you expect of an old seadog who has only recently retired after spending most of his life on the water, ending as Captain Chandler?

In fact, these 'ocean-going spaceships', designed and staffed and disciplined out of a lifetime's familiarity, are more believable than the products of writers who accept the spaceship as a useful piece of SF hardware and forget that it is a miniature breathing, living world.

Grimes appeared as a minor character in early Rim Worlds novels, which began in 1961, but took star status in *Into the Alternate Universe* (Ace Double with *The Coils of Time*, 1964), and has never looked back through seventeen published novels, and two as yet unseen.

Grimes's appeal lies, for me, in the sober normalcy of himself and his friends and foes. The environs may be bizarre, the adventures fantastic, but they are faced by people like ourselves; we are not plagued by red-blooded numbskulls or yawnworthy superheroes.

In his short stories, another side of Bert Chandler is seen, displaying a quirkish humour better suited to the swift anecdote than the complex novel. There is the tale of how Ayers Rock turned out to be an ancient spaceship



Lee Harding, 1982 (Photo: Elaine Cochrane)

— and took off. There is my favourite, ‘Late’, about the orbiting astronaut who returned to Earth to discover himself the only man in history who had missed the Last Trump. We could do with a collection of these tales.

He is a good man for Australian SF, writing for *Void* and *Boggle* though better markets are available, always friendly, available when needed, a writer who knows both his worth and his obligations.

He has been published by Ace, Daw, Monarch, Dell, Lancer and Curtis in America; by Herbert Jenkins, Mayflower and Robert Hale in England; by Wren and Horwitz in Australia; and by just about every major SF magazine you care to name, as well as such gentlemanly outsiders as *Town and Country* and *John O’London’s Weekly*. And has been translated into eleven languages, including Japanese.

This renegade Englishman is the most Australian in theme and atmosphere of any of our writers. The native-born might ponder this, then look again at their own imitations of overseas idols.

Damien Broderick

Damien Broderick has been in science fiction as editor, critic and writer for 20 years. His collection, *A Man Returned*, of 1965, is a far cry from the sophisticated writer of today, but he is recognisably, distinctively there.

His tales are rarely easy, his style is mannered in the extreme, and his interest is in underlying meaning rather than explication. Like many another, he will seek your opinion ‘as a matter of interest’, and discard it immediately as being of no interest. This, however irritating to the asked, is not an entirely bad thing in a writer. Damien does not wish to be influenced (which is in general right of him), but certainly retains more than he allows you to know. He does not write a great deal of SF, but his story, ‘A Passage to Earth’, in *Rooms of Paradise*, is an excellent sample of his style and orientation.

In 1977 he followed John Baxter in putting together, for Angus & Robertson, an anthology, *The Zeitgeist Machine*, arguably the best collection of Australian science fiction to that date.

A novel published in America made little impact, but in 1980 *The Dreaming Dragons*, wholly Australian in setting and conception, established him as a genre novelist of whom much may be hoped. He is not always easily



Damien Broderick, 1976 (Photo: George Turner Estate collection)

read or prepared to concede much to his reading public — which is not always an ill sign — but leaves no doubt of a solid talent. He has also a novella in the recent Le Guin anthology, *Edges*.

Jack Wodhams

In the 1960s Jack Wodhams hit a responsive spot in the not-really-tough-hearted Campbell, and the Grand Cham of American SF published him often in *Analog* for several years. Then came Ben Bova, with a different taste in fiction, and the association lapsed. Jack had then a racy, dialogue-oriented style, a penchant for wild, sometimes absurd but always provocative ideas, and a neat hand at the twist-in-the-tale story. He also sold to *Amazing* and *Vision of Tomorrow*.

Lately he has contributed more seriously angled tales to the Paul Collins magazines and anthologies. He writes everything — stories, novels, poems, plays, telecripts, you name it. How much is sold I don’t know, any more than I can hazard a guess at what he might or might not achieve in the future.

Lee Harding

If Bert Chandler is our most prestigious writer, Lee Harding is our most diverse and, within Australia, the most influential. He is a dedicated writer, determined on success, and success is coming to him after a long apprenticeship. He has, like any of us, his limitations, but he has also some distinctive abilities and a willingness to attempt fresh areas.

From the *New Worlds* and *Vision of Tomorrow* days, one tale, ‘Dancing Gerontius’, still remains sharply in memory.

His first real break came with the publication of his novel *World of Shadows* (Robert Hale in Britain). It made no SF history, but was a promising work.

It was followed by the paperback *Future Sanctuary* (Lancer in USA), and *The Weeping Sky* was published by Cassell Australia in 1977 to considerable fan applause.

More interesting is *Displaced Person* (Hyland House, 1979), a novel that can be seen as a 55,000-word metaphor for teenage alienation; and a most striking metaphor it is. It is his most stylish work yet, and will appear also from Quartet, England, and Harper & Row, America.

Lee is no gadgeteer; he writes of people and surroundings as an indivisible whole, with fantasy and

wonder arising out of them rather than being imposed upon them.

He has also been busy in other less usual directions, mostly concerning youth education. A few years ago, Cassell Australia published a series of short paperbacks designed for remedial-reading classes. Lee did four of these: *Fallen Spaceman* (1973) (not the same as his *Iftale* of the same title), *Children of Atlantis* (1976), *The Frozen Sky* (1976) and *Return to Tomorrow* (1976). They were popular, they were reprinted and, I believe, sold also in Britain.

These books, written with word-by-word attention to remedial-reading necessities, were, says Harding, the most difficult fiction he has attempted.

These brought him to the attention of the ABC, for whom he did a children's radio serial, *Journey Into Time*. The gimmick was that classes of backward readers listened to the play with the script in their hands so that they could relate the speeches to the printed word. This was a success with kids and teachers, so another, *Legend of New Earth*, was written.

Finally, Lee Harding has had the greatest public success to date. He edited an anthology, *Beyond Tomorrow*, for Wren in 1976, featuring reprints from such writers as Aldiss, Dick and Le Guin, and bravely mixing in with them original tales by local writers Tony Morphet, David Grigg, Cherry Wilder and John Baxter. The local talent stood not too badly beside the giants. NEL published the English edition, minus five stories and most of the editorial material.

He decided to do an anthology of original stories, wherein Australian writers would be deliberately pitted against the world's best. The result was *Rooms of Paradise*. Having recruited Brian Aldiss, Gene Wolfe, Ian Watson, Michael Bishop, R. A. Lafferty and a greatly talented Japanese gentleman, Sakyo Komatsu, he commanded six Australians to match the efforts of this formidable team. They were Kevin McKay, Cherry Wilder, David Lake, Philippa C. Maddern, Damien Broderick and myself.

Australia's prize entry, which has caused much comment, was Kevin McKay's 'Pie Row Joe', a totally original piece in outback dialect, as Australian in conception and treatment as Dame Edna Everage can never be — and the only piece of fiction he had ever written. Three of our six entries were chosen by Terry Carr for inclusion in his annual *World's Best* volumes, and the whole book was picked up by the prestigious St Martin's Press in New York.

Hyland House

Rooms of Paradise was the first SF venture of a new firm, Hyland House, based in Melbourne, which is interested in quality SF — and only in *quality* SF.

The principals of Hyland House, Ann Godden and

Al Knight, were also the organisers of the Alan Marshall Award for narrative fiction. In 1978 Lee Harding's novel, *Displaced Person*, won the Alan Marshall Award. Published by Hyland House, it sold some 5000 copies in hard covers and was judged the best Australian juvenile of the year. Harper & Row published it in America. There, for the moment, his record stands.

Wild & Woolley

Another firm, Wild & Woolley, produced a small torrent of expensive paperbacks that reflect the firm's name ideally. Few, alas, have been good books, and their two SF satires — *It*, by Chris Aulich, and *The Empathy Experiment*, by D. M. Foster and D. K. Lyall (both in 1978) — have been dreary send-ups in that specially disliked form of New Wavery that seems, fortunately, on the verge of expiry.

Pergamon Press

More successful was Pergamon Press, with its excellently illustrated *Play Little Victims* (1978), by Kenneth Cook. Filmgoers will remember *Wake in Fright (Outback)*, based on a Kenneth Cook novel.

Play Little Victims is a savagely funny satirical fantasy about a world dominated by mice after the demise of Man. I hope this one has reached the British and American market, because it's a bleakly comic charmer.

The current situation, June 1981

What have we, then, for thirty years of effort? A thing of stops and starts, lacking always a major talent or a strong local success, certainly lacking a significant global output until the closing days of 1980. There were post-war years of feverish activity that produced only the imitative and the ephemeral until John Baxter's *Pacific Books* marked a first statement of aspirations beyond fandom. The fanzines of Bangsund and Gillespie marked the awakening of a critical conscience, and the Le Guin workshop aroused a new group of young writers whose roots were *not* in the pulp magazines. Literature Board interest was behind the first real push towards literary maturity.

For all this, what have we to show?

A handful of competent novels; a double handful of good short stories; a rising reputation for militant criticism, and a foot in the door of world markets.

Not very much, perhaps, but at least the beginning of extension beyond our own purlieus. Australian science fiction is being noticed in the big world outside, but to maintain that interest it must become an individual, native product. American and British imitations will not survive. As always, the future begins — now.

— January–May 1979 and June 1981

George's Favourite SF Writers

URSULA K. LE GUIN I

Paradigm and pattern:

Form and meaning in 'The Dispossessed'

Reviewed:

The Dispossessed by Ursula K. Le Guin
(Victor Gollancz; 1974; 319 pp.
Harper & Row; 1974; 338 pp.)

One of the problems confronting the reviewer of a novel that seeks to break fresh ground — and I contend that *The Dispossessed* does so seek, in its relationship to the general trends of SF — is a sense of his own probable inadequacy in fully grasping what the author has intended.

My reaction on first reading *The Dispossessed* was, 'Yes! This is a novel of quality.' But I was not prepared to say precisely why, because I had that sense, which every thinking reader must come to at some stage in his pursuit of pleasure, of the superficial (mainly emotional) reaction not being the final one. That prose lay below the immediate acceptance. That thinking was necessary.

This is the process which led me years ago to modify my ecstatic reception of Alfred Bester into a wry grin at having been neatly conned, and more recently to appreciate the work of J. G. Ballard in the teeth of an instinctive rejection of his ideas.

A second reading of *The Dispossessed* showed me where my hesitations and misapprehensions lay, but it took the full discussion of the book at the first meeting of the reconstituted Nova Mob [held Thursday, 5 December 1974 as the revival of Melbourne's SF discussion group] to bring basic questions into the light and show me where my own thought was leading. A passing thought of *Daniel Deronda* — of all books! — dropped the last requirement into place, and now I feel I have some overall view of the novel — its attempts, successes and failures.

My first reaction remains unchanged: it is a good novel as contemporary novels go; it is an important novel for the SF reader and more so for the SF writer.

And this in spite of the Nova Mob's general tone of disappointment.

What I write here was not said at that meeting. It had not then been thought out in coherent fashion.

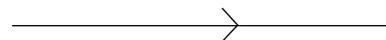
The Nova Mob objections centred, in the main, around the conception of *The Dispossessed* as a political novel, and everybody (self included) condemned it for political naïvety. I recall making some mild objections, but hadn't thought the thing sufficiently through to see where the error lay.

They also condemned it on grounds of flat characterisation and conventional plotting,¹ of which more later. But nobody said outright that it is a bad novel. One had the feeling that they recognised their discussion as superficial but could not detect the way in to the subsurface levels.

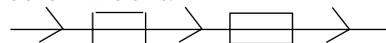
The 'way in' lies in the form in which the novel is written. I was acutely aware of this at the time, but had not then tackled the problem in sufficient detail to make an argument of it.

So — here a short digression about 'form'.

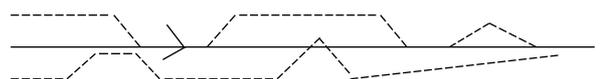
I use the word to mean the diagrammatic shape of a story. For instance, the common adventure story runs in a straight line from beginning through development to a definite end. Thus:



It may feature a few halts for flashbacks. One could represent them like this:



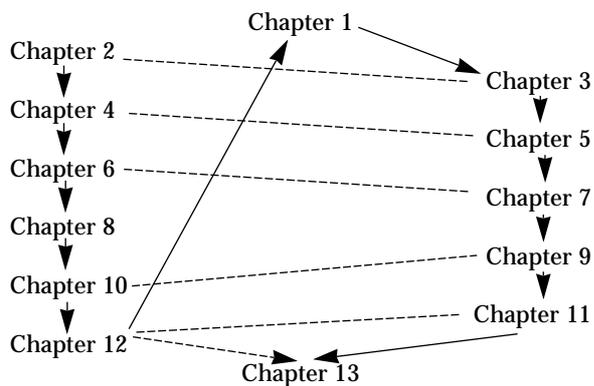
With some writers (Philip Dick notably) story lines are often parallel with different sets of characters whose paths intersect, separate and converge for a finale. So:



Now, each of these patterns (and they can become very complex) is selected by the author as being the most useful frame on which his story-idea (theme) can be mounted. Once this frame is selected — and most writers select with some deliberation before the actual writing begins — the frame has itself an effect on the nature of the final product. It exerts a definite pressure on the act of story-telling, and the more complex the

frame, the more powerful the pressure — and the greater the art needed to produce an attractive result.

The framework of *The Dispossessed* is this shape (reading from the top down):



This pattern is not as complex as the diagram would make it appear. The meaning of it is that in Chapter 1 a main plot is set up and continues through the odd-numbered chapters to a conclusion in Chapter 13. With Chapter 2 a long flashback is begun, which serves the overt purpose of describing how the set-up causing the main plot came into being. This flashback — really a separate and complementary novel — continues through the even-numbered chapters to Chapter 12, which brings the story to the point where Chapter 1 took off.

So you *could* read the novel in this order — Chapter 2-4-6-8-10-12-1-3-5-7-9-11-13. So why didn't Le Guin write the book in that straightforward order?

This is the question which should have been raised at the Nova Mob meeting but was not, and to my mind the answer to it contains a fair amount of refutation of the criticisms levelled. (With, of course, the slaphappy proviso that my ideas may be a light year or two off the mark. What I am up to is an attempt to enter Mrs Le Guin's mind as designer of the book — always a slippery slope to negotiate.)

The obvious answer to the question is that she was not writing a single continuous plot but two separate plots with *themes* which interact, and that the alternate

chapters allowed her to display her parallels as they occurred.

(This is where the thought of *Daniel Deronda* came in, because this is precisely the form George Eliot adopted exactly 100 years before, even to the use of the same hero as connecting link, and for the same purpose — the display of two cultures, Jewry and upper-middle-class English, in similarity and opposition. For all I know Le Guin might never have read *Deronda*, but this was the consideration which led me to consider form as an essential part of statement.)

At this point there is nothing for it but to lay out the book in the design I have adopted, if only to show clearly the meaning of those dotted lines crossing the space between plots. And to bring in Chapter 13, which ties up both plots and all the themes, and introduces something new which all the rest has led up to.

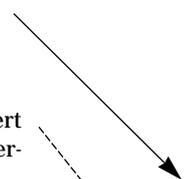
First, the background. This account is spread through the chapters but can be summarised briefly: Two worlds, Urras and Anarres, orbit a common centre of gravity about the star Tau Ceti. Some two centuries before the story opens, only Urras is populated and is at the space-flight stage of technical progress. It would appear to be a Terra-type world with a culture similar to Twentieth-Century Western. Political dissidents seeking a new philosophy of freedom (i.e. equal opportunity and freedom from imposed government) flee to the desert world of Anarres and there strive to build a new civilisation based on anarchic principles (no oxymoron intended). Anarres is rich in metals and Urras has, Terra-fashion, been prodigal of hers, so the Anarresti support themselves by trading their metals for certain basics from Urras. But in the main they are self-supporting. Their position is much that of the kibbutzim of today — living hard while they force the desert to bloom. But there is no cultural contact. There is a spaceport — with a wall around it. The Urrastic spacemen are not permitted beyond the wall. The opening line of the novel is, 'There was a wall', and this symbol recurs throughout the story. (This alone should have been enough to warn us all that the bias of the novel is philosophical, not political.)

Chapter 1

'There was a wall.' Through the wall walks the physicist Shevek, an Anarrestic bent on visiting Urras and breaking down the real wall — the two-century-old cultural barrier between the planets. His voyage is not popular among his people, who see Urras as a dangerous psychological hell. He makes the trip in an Urrastic freighter, savagely on guard against advances by the Urrasti crew, and lands on Urras, where he is met by Urrasti scientists.

Chapter 2

This first chapter of the 'Anarres novel' tells of Shevek's childhood on his desert planet, of his natural acceptance of the anarchist way of life, his joy in brother-



hood of man and woman. Another boy, Tirin, mixes the popular view with an unpopular hint of rebellion when he cries, 'Informed! I've heard about Urras ever since nursery! I don't care if I never see another picture of foul Urrasti cities and greasy Urrasti bodies!' It is the first pale hint of discontent.

Chapter 3

On Urras the adult Shevek is growing up again, at the learning stage in an Urras which is not quite the world Anarresti educational propaganda has painted. 'He had no right to the grace and bounty of this world, earned and maintained by the work . . . of its people . . . he did not belong . . . the settlers of Anarres have turned their backs on the Old World . . . but to deny is not to achieve.' Detecting untruth, he begins to see his Anarres more clearly.

Chapter 4

Shevek's parents separate early in his life; marriage customs are not binding. The state rears him and he becomes a brilliant physicist. Invited to work with the scientific doyen, Sabul, he finds, instead of a brilliant physicist, a burned-out old man who steals the work of others and can manipulate records and usages to eliminate competition as ruthlessly as a boss of the Old World. Shevek discovers that the idea of a non-authoritarian state depends on human goodwill — but not all are men of goodwill.

Chapter 5

Shevek learns that these selfless scientists are not men of goodwill on beautiful Urras either. He is working on a total synthesis equation (the basic formula of energy/time) and this is the reason for his welcome. The Urrasti will use the equation for an FTL drive which will give Urras dominance over Terra and Hain. (This dates the action. The Le Guin Union of Worlds is in existence on a slower-than-light basis but the 'ansible' has not yet been invented. There are embassies on Urras but none on isolationist Anarres.) So Shevek has learned that a different system does not mean different human natures.

Chapter 6

Sickness from overwork leads Shevek to join more in social life, and here he discovers that individuals can be unhappy under this system he has been reared to think of as perfect. Freedom of choice is not really free, but governed by habit and the power of group disapproval. Two creative artists, Tirin and Salas, playwright and musician, cannot obtain performance of their works, which are 'ideologically unsound'. 'Are we so feeble we can't stand a little exposure?' Under non-authoritarian conditions the body is tended but the intellect is strait-jacketed by majority opinion — meaning those who accept 'what is' without thinking.

Chapter 7

Shevek must use subterfuge to protect his work on Urras, just as he used it to maintain his right to research on Anarres. Conditions are different, but it is the same fight. He learns of the difference between rich and poor and of the subversive organisations which envy the 'freedom' of Anarres.

Chapter 8

This chapter does not feature deliberate parallels with Chapter 9, so far as I can see, but continues the story of Shevek's disillusionment. He marries and has a child. Then drought strikes Anarres and for years the family is scattered by the necessity to allocate talents where the state requires. In theory there are methods of hanging together as a family, but these involve sneers about slacking and selfishness. He has the satisfaction of duty done, but his private life is taken from him. The non-authoritarian state is as effectively authoritarian as capitalist

Urras. Only the methods are different.

Chapter 9

Shevek completes his equation but is determined that Urras shall not have it. He seeks out and contacts a subversive group, which shelters him. Involved in a public demonstration, he witnesses police brutality and finds himself hunted and on the run. Now he is seeing the true underside of the physical paradise of Urras.

Chapter 10

The drought breaks; Shevek is back with his family, but now he knows there is no perfection in Anarres. He learns of Tirin the playwright, in an asylum, out of his mind with the treatment given to unstraitjacketed thought. He learns of the existence of cultural dropouts and realises the tyranny of the social conscience. Protest is in the air; he is not alone in his discoveries. This is the beginning of the Shevek who joined the subversives on Urras, who has seen the underside of the egalitarian paradise of Anarres.

Chapter 11

Shevek seeks refuge in the Terran Embassy and there meets people to whom his doubts and discoveries are old troubles in their histories. He presents the Worlds with his equation for the use of all mankind. In return he asks only for transport home to Anarres. He has nowhere else to go. At least on Anarres he *knows* the system he is fighting. He has bucked both systems with success as an individual, but really he is beaten. He has made a gesture for all the Worlds, but is no nearer his aim of breaking down The Wall.

Chapter 12

Shevek joins the Syndicate of Initiative, a group wishing to bring new ideas to the stagnant ideology of Anarres. But his idea of visiting Urras to break down the cultural wall is too extreme. Threats of violence are made, if he persists. He is symbolically on the run from his own people, as he will be later from the bureaucrats of Urras. We are at the point where he joins the Urrasti freighter in Chapter 1. He has learned about Anarres with its realities under the ideological surface; he is about to learn about Urras, with its unrest under the beautiful surface.

Chapter 13

A Hain spaceship carries Shevek back to Anarres. On the voyage he is questioned by a Hain officer, who is interested in the Anarresti philosophy. It has been tried on other worlds, he tells Shevek, but has never worked; yet it seems to hold more promise than any other philosophy. He would like to visit Anarres, to become Anarresti in order to study it at first hand. Shevek warns him grimly that he doesn't know what he is doing, but agrees to take him off the ship. The cycle of trial and error is about to begin again with a fresh protagonist.

Reducing all this detail to a more simple and probably more meaningful outline, we find something like this:

Brilliant physicist Shevek finds that the psychological attitudes engendered by the fierce isolationism of the non-authoritarian state make it impossible for him to have his own work accepted. He has contacts on Urras and knows it will be accepted there, so he goes to Urras with a dual purpose: (a) to complete his work, and (b) to break down the cultural wall between planets. This dual purpose is symbolic of one theme in the book — the coexistence of personal and abstract needs, of the individual as individual and as member of the state. This conflict is as disruptive an internal force in both Anarres and Urras as is the external force of their mutual distrust.

Urras seems at first a marvel, not at all the cultural dungheap propagandised by Anarresti education. But Shevek eventually meets the same problems, blown to greater proportions because of the greater age of the Urrasti system. Once again he must discard a way of living and return to the old; at least he understands Anarres and can survive its problems more efficiently.

But he has come full circle, knowing that both authoritarianism and non-authoritarianism founder on the rock of individualist psychology, and that the wall cannot be breached where the two sides have no ground of mental contact.

Here, then, is the theme which permeates the bulk of Le Guin's writing — the need for meaningful communication. It might seem that it has come to a dead end here, but in the last chapter a new cycle of endeavour begins. The Hainish officer, member of a world which has seen all the great political experiments come and go, including anarchism, feels that the answer may yet emerge from a fresh investigation of the non-authoritarian ideal.

He goes with Shevek to Anarres. History grinds into action again. Communication is *not* impossible if only a man of goodwill can find the way.

It has been necessary to lay out the groundwork at such length because of the nature of the arguments urged against *The Dispossessed*.

The strongest objection from the Nova Mob — a group with no lack of critical acumen — was that it is politically naïve.

If the book is regarded as a political novel, this is probably so, in the sense that political implications are not followed through according to any specific philosophy. (Being amazingly ignorant of political theory, and of firm intent upon staying that way, I rely upon the Nova Mob for the accuracy of that last sentence. Bless 'em all.)

But — is it a political novel? I don't think so. I did at first, if only because so much hinges upon the detailed working of the non-authoritarian system that one has a distinct feeling of involvement in a political argument.

However, the system of Anarres can destroy the soul as surely as the capitalism of Urras can starve the body, so where is the argument? One feels that Le Guin would like to defend Anarres, but in honesty cannot.

So the two systems are not being compared for the sake of the praising of one. Shevek is disillusioned with both.

Is it, then, a novel of disillusionment? (Very popular theme these days — among those who would rather whine about 'the system' than take up moral or physical arms against it. Although well bloodied by five-plus decades of 'the system', I still prefer the optimistic approach. We have some millions of years in which to make our mistakes.)

The *plot* is certainly about disillusionment (but don't neglect the gleam of light at the finish), but what is behind the plot?

It seems to me that I stated it a few paragraphs back — the mental ambiguity involved in being both an individual and a member of a state.

Duty is plain — as a member of the state which ruthlessly severs families, cuts short careers and subordinates all things to a 'general welfare' but which somehow never seems successfully to bestow the egalitarianism it promises.

Duty is plain also as a husband, as a mother or as an artist whose conception of serving the state is not that of the official ideology.

So Shevek is damned, whatever he does — and will be damned under any other system. Shevek is an individual discovering that he is not a nested ant.

There, I think, is Le Guin's real theme — the conflict between man the individual and man the group member. She does not know the answer; she only presents the problem, with a hint that the way of Anarres may contain the seeds of resolution.

I do not say that Le Guin *intended* this as the theme; only she can know what was in her mind. I say that, whatever she intended, the dual-responsibility theme is what she has achieved.

The Dispossessed, whatever its origins, is not a political novel. It is about a *human* problem which *every* system, political or cultural or merely office-administrative, must face and fail to solve. Fail, because no system can cover all the variations of human self-determination.

Is some ideal form of non-authoritarianism the answer? The idea terrifies me because I have a lifetime of guidelines embedded in my thinking, but it seems the only grouping sufficiently elastic to allow full development of individual potential. (I leave it to others to suggest how such decentralisation will solve the food problem. That's the snag that undermines Anarres.) A non-authoritarian state involves a totally moral community. But which morality?

Le Guin is posing questions to which we have no answers, but such are the questions that must be asked, year after year, until the beginnings of answers appear. She poses them very well, very clearly, and this is the value of *The Dispossessed*.

On the literary side, we must go into this matter of the use of form and what it does to the novelist's work.

Usually the story to be told determines the manner of telling — the shape of the narrative — the form.

A fast action story is told usually in straightforward style, rushing on until the reader stops with a jolt of ending. An action story with more serious undertones — say *Dune* or *Frankenstein Unbound* — may proceed in a series of jerks (carefully smoothed and disguised) interspersed with quieter stretches of contemplation or

revelatory dialogue. The novel of manners may often be diagrammed as spangles of wit and insight hanging from the mere thread of plot. The psychological novel can frequently be seen as a rising stem of personality shedding gobbets of incident as it moves towards revelation.

There is also another type of structure wherein the progress of a thematic idea is the main substance of the work, and all other considerations — plot, characterisation, etc. — must hang from the theme. This is the case where plot is not ‘character in action’ but a carefully designed paradigm (in its proper sense of ‘example’, not ‘analogy’) into whose pattern all other elements of the work must fit. Characterisation in particular must be muted (*not* reduced to cardboard cutouts) so that the reader’s attention is not split along the many lines of interest; he must be able to identify with the characters but not to the point where he begins to take sides in the argument presented.

This is the commonest form of the SF presentation. How many memorable characters have emerged from SF? (Strangely, some of the most easily recalled — R. Daneel Olivaw, Trweel, Anderson’s Joe, Sturgeon’s Daisy Etta — were not people. There’s food for thought in this. Some other time.) It is probably what is meant by the cry of ‘the idea as hero’ by those who find characterisation too difficult and use ‘the idea’ to cover a multitude of sins. But it has its purpose, and in *The Dispossessed* this purpose is fulfilled admirably.

Le Guin’s use of the parallel stories is a stroke of excellence. As a pattern, it allows point-for-point comparisons between the two cultures, and by telling the same tale of disillusionment against two oppositely conceived backgrounds Le Guin makes her point about the failure of cultural systematisation without ever mentioning the idea.

In such parallel the same line unwinds, yet the two are not so similar as to make the pattern drearily obvious. The Anarres line stretches from birth to the moment of disillusion and action through years of learning what the world is about; in the Urras parallel the grown man perceives and learns much faster, until he comes to the same moment of disillusion and action. The curious Chapter 13, with its mixture of despair and cautious hope, does little for the plot, but serves to push the theme a stage further, to point out that the end of a story is not the end of the world, that there is more to come because every ending is also the threshold of a beginning. (This is what was meant by the critic — whose name I have forgotten — who pointed out that Dostoyevsky’s crime novels begin where another man’s thriller leaves off.) Le Guin may not be ready to write the novel which begins where the Hainish officer steps out on to the surface of Anarres, but somebody else may yet pick up the idea and take the theme from there.

Le Guin has exposed the possibility, and so has done SF a service; as far as I can remember, this theme has not been used in SF previously, except as a passing remark.

Whether the service will be recognised is another matter. Tom Disch, in 334, also opened up a fresh approach to some SF problems, but one doesn’t even hear of the book being appreciated, let alone hailed for

excellence. And certainly not recognised for the milestone it is.

Working to a pattern imposes subservience to the pattern. A theme is being stated, from a carefully descriptive beginning to a predetermined end. In such a work, no character can take over at midpoint and overturn the author’s intention with sheer individualism. As a writer, I get a terrific kick when this happens because it means the story has come alive, but whoever writes to a stern design cannot afford the luxury of loving some such creation too much to inhibit him.

The point I make here is that criticism of *The Dispossessed* on the ground of unadventurous characterisation — and some of the Nova Mob did make this criticism — indicates a failure to recognise the nature and meaning of the novel. (Easy for me to be superior. I’ve got all their opinions and insights to work with as well as my own two readings and three months in which to mull it over.)

The characterisation is at all times fully adequate for its purpose. The characters are all *types*, all people of a kind one would expect to find in existence under the various sets of given circumstances.

Shevek is the archetypal dedicated scientist — a genius in his field, vulnerable and almost ignorant outside his field, slow to action, prone to the intellectual sin of vacillating between the two sides of a question, angered by bureaucracy and prejudice and at the same time unable to recognise the stultifying beliefs and prejudices of which his own mind is stuffed full. That is quite a full character, really, but we know him — at least in outline — from a hundred failed protest operas.

So, also, we know his wife, Takver, the intelligent research worker who adapts to the system but still finds ways and means to be mother, wife and helpmeet even in the days of separation and trial, and who loyally supports him when public opinion turns rancid.

And we know Tirin the playwright, who made the mistake of writing social criticism in a non-critical society, and Sabul the failed academic, living on reputation and the work of his juniors, and Vea the Urrasti socialite, whose attempted seduction becomes a rape by a drunken physicist. We know them all.

I protest, however, that Le Guin has not fobbed us off with a set of stick figures. She has gone to much trouble to build each one carefully to the point where his or her designed impact on the thematic structure is logical and perfectly placed. (*Too* perfect? *Too designed?* But this is a designed, patterned, constructed novel, and must be read as such. If you read for what you expect instead of making the small effort to appreciate what you are given, you will never be satisfied by anything but the mixture as before. And then God help you — and all writers of novels.) More, she has breathed some life into her characters by *not* insisting on what they are. Each one grows gently into his or her final form, coaxed along with an undramatic realism of small events and unspectacular talk, but developing all the while.

It is unreasonable to complain that they don’t develop into great diverse and memorable figures. They are, in general, far more like human beings than the usual

screechings which SF's substitutes for characterisation prepare us to expect. In fact *The Dispossessed*, despite its blatant planning and patterning, is a far more realistic novel than SF can show in all its welter of Hugos and mind-blowings and fan adulations. It is a relief to come upon a writer who can present human beings, however familiar, and show that they too can travel the stars and shake civilisations. (Also Disch and Compton. Who else?)

I can't accept the complaint about characterisation. A closer look shows more characterisation in *The Dispossessed* than most SF writers inject into a lifetime of writing, and far more than most writers of any kind could produce within the limits of such a strict framework.

The great literary virtue of *The Dispossessed* is the illusion of realism. One can believe in desert Anarres, in the aims and beliefs and mental strictures of her people finally caught up in the realities of a stern ideology, in the slow realisation that there are other things in the cosmos than simple brotherhood and selflessness. Urras, paradigm of our western Earth, is less believable because Le Guin has expended less effort on the already known — and because there are elements of exaggeration here, stemming from the intrusion of her private beliefs. In particular, some overstressed women's-libberly seems uncomfortable in its setting; the points made about female equivalence on Anarres say all that needs to be said, and the underlining of their situation on Urras is coals to Newcastle.

This is my only real irritation about an excellent novel.

On the matter of unoriginal plotting, I recall John Foyster complaining that *The Dispossessed* wound up like a *Startling Stories* novel (which was, I feel, a little excessive for the usually accurate John) — and hastily adding that he will happily read *Startling Stories* also. Perhaps he meant that it was not a really deep complaint.

And in fact it isn't. Plot, except in the superficial thriller, is less important than the handling of plot, and theme is the novelist's consideration rather than the mechanics of interaction which, ideally, should be disguised to the point of reader unawareness. Where plot is paramount you have — though there are exceptions — a superficial, immediately interesting but forgettable book. Where theme is paramount — and this is roughly the difference between the serious novel and the romance — the reader has some chance of a memorable experience.

An illustration? How about 'Cinderella'? The plot is 'boy meets girl', but the theme is 'virtue triumphant', and it is the downfall of the Ugly Sisters which demands and retains attention rather than the wholly predictable activities of the Prince. He is only a bonus for Cinderella's being a good girl.

It is my own professional opinion that any old plot will do — and there are supposed to be only five basic plots — as long as you have something interesting to say. Plot should support the theme, not dominate it.

I think Le Guin did rightly in plotting without subtlety. We've had sufficient critical misapprehension about the book without being further sidetracked by

ingenuities of manipulation. The simple plot had the virtue of inevitability, with the single exception of the manner of Shevek's contact with the subversives of Urras, and even that was humanly and dramatically believable.

Look at the book for what it is — the patient exposition of a theme, presented in simple form and clothed in an unassumingly realistic method of writing — and most objections begin to wither. In fairness to the author, one's appreciation should take account of what is there, not of what one would rather have found there. In looking for the kind of story you want, it is too easy to undervalue the story given you.

Do I hear someone muttering, 'And now he wants us to appreciate a dressed-up diagram?'

Sure. Why not? What do you think you've been reading all your life but dressed-up diagrams? *The Dispossessed* just happens to be more diagrammatic than most, and this is precisely the trait that allows it to make its point. I salute the intelligence that saw this as the right and simple way to present the theme.

One further point raised at the Nova Mob meeting deserves consideration. Bruce Gillespie asked something on the lines of, 'Why are the publishers, both American and English, giving this book the VIP treatment?'

The implication was that *The Dispossessed* wasn't worth such treatment.² I disagree, because it is the sort of novel which could beuile the non-SF reader into a greater appreciation of SF. Gollancz has published its edition without the 'SF' imprint. And why not, when the 'SF' imprint involves, in the non-SF mind, too much that is unblushingly shoddy and an insult to the intelligence? SF at its worst can make Larry and Stretch look like intellectuals, so why should not a publisher quietly seek a wider public by suppression rather than advertisement, and by promotion on merits rather than on genre affiliation?

The SF reader — jaded with the ephemeral mind-blowings of the super-science boys and the tortured literary gymnastics of the Jerry Cornelius school — will probably get less out of *The Dispossessed* than the reader with a wider span of interest; its appeal is to the intellect rather than the emotions. (Which reminds me that I have not discussed Le Guin's ideas about non-authoritarian systems. Nor am I going to. I am not competent.)

Bruce's real complaint might lie perhaps in such enormities as the blurb on the jacket of the American edition of *The Dispossessed*. I quote it in full:

The Dispossessed breathes life into the Utopian tradition for our ambiguous age of hope and terror and masterfully raises science fiction to major humanistic literature. It speaks in an angry, compassionate, wise, beautiful voice. A synthesis for our times, a literary and cultural event of the first order.

We know that even reputable writers tend to go a little overboard in producing quotable blurbs for publishers, and we discount them accordingly. But this one is attributed to the mandarin assuredness, the pontifical laying-down-of-the-literary-law of none other than

Darko Suvin, Professor in the Department of English at McGill University. So it just has to be the right goods, huh?

Well, it isn't. Suvin, as a critic, should know better. And Suvin as a responsible Professor should not undermine the credibility of his profession by making demonstrably overstuffed public announcements.

'... Breathes life into the Utopian tradition...' *The Dispossessed* is totally anti-utopian, dystopian. Nor was I aware that the utopian tradition was in need of artificial respiration; it has always seemed pretty healthy.

'... Our ambiguous age of hope and terror...' is mere rhetoric. At best it is a description of every age in history. But it sounds impressive, doesn't it?

'... Masterfully...' It isn't the word I would have used or that the novel deserves. The treatment is interesting and competent and successful but too obtrusive for such a word as 'masterfully'.

'... Raises science fiction to major humanistic literature.' That is, to the levels inhabited by Proust, Mann, Dickens, Tolstoy, Fielding, etc. Pardon me if I refuse further comment.

'A synthesis for our times...' I don't know know what this means. Do you?

'... A literary and cultural event of the first order...' Balls! The first order is rare and marvellous and produces upheavals — and is usually missed by the intelligentsia until the enthusiastic mob has rubbed its nose in it.

The Dispossessed is not first-order anything. To see it with clarity we must first read it for what it is rather than for what we expect, and read it also without a burst of literary-mandarin stars in our eyes. What emerges is an originally conceived and executed novel operating on levels unfamiliar to conventional SF and leaning more towards the novel of intellectual apparatus. It is removed from the traditions of SF and could not in fact have been executed successfully within those traditions. It is an indication of the directions in which science-fictional thinking can travel when allied to a solid appreciation of the possibilities of form and structure. It is not a masterpiece; it is a solid and, in the main, successful attempt to break the mould. More than this, it *speculates*, which is more than can be said of 99 per cent of those who hopefully label their product 'speculative fantasy'.

The Suvin celebration is misplaced and is a fine example of the kind of addled adulation which causes serious-minded critics to view the SF field with justifiable distrust. I have no doubt that Ursula Le Guin, who seems to be a lady with her head screwed firmly right way round, knows this and treats it with tolerant forgetfulness. Or does she? There are few critics less forgivable than those who credit you with glories you know you have not achieved.

In sum, *The Dispossessed* is an excellent novel, well above the current ruck. It is not as totally successful a novel as Disch's *334*, which displays a greater mastery of

subject and technique, but it makes the rest of the year's product look smaller than it otherwise might.

All this is sufficient reason for publishers to promote a novel by one of SF's brightest stars, and one who shows signs of successfully bridging the gap between genre SF and the novel.

As for the Nova Mob's doubts and settings down, I stick my neck out to disagree, to say that *The Dispossessed* is a better novel than they allowed. Remember, too, that no work, however good, will come out of a group discussion unscathed. This, I think, is a case where weaknesses were pointed with some reason but values went unassessed or unrecognised because the formal nature of the work has not been appreciated.

PS:

I thought I had finished, but re-reading shows much of what the literary- and philosophy-minded may expect of *The Dispossessed*, but little of what the *science* fiction reader will look for.

For him there is the beautifully worked-out description of the desert world of Anarres and the survival measures of the settlers. Comparison with *Dune* is almost inevitable here, but it is not really germane. Herbert concentrated on the ecological aspects, with surprisingly little consideration of the social echoes, and his characters acted out a melodrama which did not arise out of the physical conditions.

Le Guin offers a bare framework of factual description with only sufficient detail to pin down specific factors. Her interest is in the effect of the desert economy on the settlers and the way in which it pushes their ideology to the limit of its capability to cope. As a result, one sees Anarres through the eyes of its inhabitants, and their activities take on a finer colour of realistic drama.

This seems to me a superior approach to Herbert's. Human activity is the supreme interest of fiction; background, however detailed and accurate, supports drama but does not create it. Only people create.

— *SF Commentary* 41/42, February 1975

Bruce Gillespie's footnotes to the original publication:

1 'Condemned' is too strong a word. I rather felt the discussion, for most people, started with the unstated prefix, 'I liked *The Dispossessed* very much, but...' *The Dispossessed* was received with great enthusiasm in Melbourne when copies first circulated.

2 Implication denied. My implication was that the last thing publishers (John Bush of Gollancz excepted) seem to consider in promoting books is quality. Therefore, what are the *commercial* qualities in *The Dispossessed* that let the publishers spend so much on it?

From Paris to Anarres

Reviewed:

The Wind's Twelve Quarters

by Ursula K. Le Guin

(Harper & Row; 297 pp.)

The habit of fanzine critics — and others — of grinding through a volume of stories, one by one, with a few lines of pat or poison for each, should be abolished. The late P. Schuyler Miller, I think, introduced this scrutiny-of-minutiae method many years ago, when he was SF's only consistently appearing reviewer; but he knew most of the writers personally and possibly felt that if he mentioned Weinlein's 'Cement-Heads from the Blue Dimension' and didn't give equal billing to Heinbaum's 'Menace from the Jim Beam Planet' he'd have a feud on his hands. That doesn't mean we all have to do it.

I admit having done it myself, mainly because it seemed to be expected of me, and was once taken to task by 'Irate Reader' or someone similar for *not* doing it, but don't propose to carry on this unproductive habit. Anthologies are usually put together with a plan or theme in mind, and the reviewer should use this as the standard to be measured against, discussing the *book*, not its disparate bits. Author collections also tend to be arranged with some deliberation, and it is the reviewer's business to observe the fact, report on it and bear it in mind as he writes.

So what is to borne in mind regarding Ursula Le Guin's collection? She courteously lays it out for us in the first paragraph of the Foreword:

This collection is what painters call a retrospective; it gives a roughly chronological survey of my short stories during the first ten years after I broke into print, belated but undaunted, at the age of thirty-two. They appear here very roughly in the order in which they were written, so that the development of the artist may become part of the interest of the book. I have not been rigid about the chronology (it is impossible; stories may be written in one year, not published until two or three years later, and then possibly revised, and which date do you use?) but there are no severe displacements.

'... The development of the artist ...' Yes, indeed. And Le Guin is one of the SF and fantasy writers who can claim that description with the capital A which she does *not* give it, being a sensible woman who knows that 'artist' is what you are or are not, something you cannot take credit for any more than for having eight fingers and two thumbs rather than nine and three. She also a first-class literary technician, which is something else again, so much so that it is often difficult to decide

whether artist or technician is responsible for a particular effect. (At this point the reviewer usually stops prodding at the prose and points glibly to the author's 'taut control of her material'. Budding reviewers take note: readers are easily conned by that sort of thing and you might as well learn the sleazy tricks of the game early on.)

So, since the lady is pretty good at her business, bloody good, in fact, we shall surely go along with her suggestion of seeing what has happened to her product since 'April in Paris' appeared in 1962.

In all honesty, the book would be better off without 'April in Paris', which is very much a beginner's piece. But for Le Guin-watchers it catches attention for much the same reasons as do the photographs of our friends when young; we scrutinise the fluid, forming features for the traces which have deepened into the lines and planes of the personality we recognise today.

It is a time-travel fantasy wherein a spell worked in fifteenth-century Paris gathers together an unlikely quartet whose provenance is spread over millennia, and is a group of incidents rather than a plotted tale. It is clumsy; it lays emphasis in all the wrong places as well as some of the right ones; it subjugates common sense to the demands of romance; it ... 'Now, see here, young Ursula — just you take this back and rehandle it from the point of view of the magician ... and don't use phrases like "fed up" and "muffed it" when you are trying to put across a medieval atmosphere, because they dump the reader back immediately into the twentieth century ...'

And having locked young Ursula in with her homework, we see that the face of an older, wiser, rounded-off Ursula is already forming in the failed story. There is that 'feeling' for the medieval which persists behind the errors of taste and diction and was to flower in the 'Earthsea' trilogy. There is that commonsense view of magic and fantasy which insists on limitation and order instead of free-for-all incantation and wand-waving, and even discovers a reasons of sorts why the magician's silly spell should have worked; this, too, became one of the more potent characteristics of 'Earthsea', with its different kinds of specialised wizards, variant schools of magic and inherent limitations of power. Le Guin is here present, half formed.

Next, 'The Masters', which she calls her first SF story. Perhaps it is. It deals with the rediscovery of science in the post-holocaust age, but really is a meditation (though not a very deep one) on the type of intolerance faced in another age by Galileo. Perhaps that is why it reads like a historical vignette. Written a year or so later than 'April in Paris', it shows a huge stride forward in technique but is oppressed by that affliction of the

up-and-coming short-story writer, the need to express the basic material of a slow and thoughtful novella in a few thousand words — to be read and forgotten by some bug-eyed reader while he chomps his lunch.

Three competent, enjoyable but otherwise unimportant fantasies fill the time until 1964, when appears 'Semley's Necklace', a nice little brooding tale of love and courage, hovering somewhere between the realistic setting of SF and the obliquely oriented psychology of fantasy. The tale later provided the basis for a short novel, *Rocannon's World*, and so is the cornerstone of that ramifying 'Envoy' structure whose latest wing is *The Dispossessed*. The nice little short-story writer has taken some mighty strides down the corridor between them.

There is a gap of five years to the next story. What happened between-times? Well, *Rocannon's World* happened and *Planet of Exile* and, in 1968, *A Wizard of Earthsea* — and the first period of Le Guin's development was over. At that point she had smoothed her style to a sinewy, deceptively strong instrument which could be direct or oblique, descriptive or ruminative, swift or slow; she no longer made noticeable errors of aesthetic taste or literary tact. She was still writing pleasant little romances that structured themselves like science fiction but wore the evasive/brooding/something-lurking atmosphere of fantasy. Over all lingered the shadow of that medievalism, that affinity with the past that enlivened both fifteenth-century Paris and the future world of 'The Masters'. Always a hint of barbaric splendour and romantic speech meshed with the ansible and the spaceships and the Ekumen of worlds.

All this was to end, but there was to be one more SF romance with the aura of fantasy. 'Winters's King' appeared in 1969. Basically it is a palace-intrigue story which finds a new use for the time lag in interstellar travel. It is a good story without being outstanding; its main residuum is that impression of dark emotion restrained and inevitable destiny accepted which had characterised all the work of these years.

And was now to be abandoned.

For 'Winter's King' is the tale which sparked the creation of the cold planet Gethen and its androgynes of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and began a fresh cycle of the Le Guin *oeuvre*.

At last the intellectual moved in on the romanticist, and the result was synergy rather than synthesis.

One-third of the book is behind us — the formative third; what remains is mature Le Guin.

This does not mean that in 1969 everything clicked into place and all that followed was plain sailing. What followed was in fact fresh experiment and movement into other areas of the SF field.

In 1969 came the excellent and well-known 'Nine Lives', for me the first true Le Guin SF story, uncontaminated by the air of fantasy, the touch of one-remove-from-reality which suffused such tales as 'Winter's King' and 'The Masters'. 'Nine Lives' is too well known to require detailed treatment here. Suffice it that it was one of the first science-fictional considerations of cloning from the psychological angle; most forerunners had been content with its possibility for melodrama. That I do not agree with Le Guin's projection of the idea is

neither here nor there; the story is strong, and disagreement over extrapolation is part of the fun of traditional SF; one doesn't bother disagreeing with *bad* work and the literature of ideas can only be fertilised by dissen-

sion. More interesting from the developmental point of view are the tales of vintage 1970 — 'The Good Trip', 'Things' and 'A Trip to the Head' — which I think Le Guin would describe as psychomyths, if I properly understand her use of that word in the chatty, gossipy (and useful) personal notes precluding each tale.

These three stories are close to indescribable. Each of them postulates a protagonist in an archetypal situation, responding to it with a personal logic of the deep psyche which transcends the simple logic of intelligence. These people do what they must without reference to systems of reason; they move in a straight line to an inevitable consummation without knowing or asking why. These are little masterpieces of craftsmanship, bearing so completely on the psychic point (or, if you like, the mythic point) that one has the sense of being present at the making and growth of a work — clay to armature, accretion, shaping, no waste.

She is here exploring the ground just beyond the edge of psychological visibility. R. A. Lafferty springs to mind as an example of parallel interests, but where Lafferty cavorts and caracoles amid paradox and irresolvable confrontation, Le Guin allows the story to move with deceptive simplicity. She contrives this without emphasising the strangeness of the material, presenting the extraordinary as an integral part of the ordinary. Disbelief is not suspended where no disbelief is allowed, only a creeping conviction that things probably are so in some place over the way. These tales are central to the contemplative aspect of her literary method.

The 1969–71 group is completed by 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow', a superb piece of writing whose climax I accept but do not believe in. It is one of the rare pieces wherein Le Guin fails to carry me right to the end. The build-up is faultless and the solution (for it is a 'puzzle' story) elegant, but the outcome a little obvious and not entirely justifiable for the characters as presented. But another may read it and ask, 'What's up with the man? It's the perfect ending!' Right or wrong, I cannot call it less than fine story telling, for by 1971 the Le Guin style had firmed and, most importantly, she knew precisely what she was about. She had finished *fiddling* with themes, turning them over to see what moved underneath and recording the vision hesitantly because it had scuttled away before she caught it clearly.

From '71 to '73 there is another gap (filled, I imagine, by the writing of *The Lathe of Heaven* and *The Word for World is Forest*). Then comes the extraordinary 'The Stars Below'. This one belongs with the group of psychomyths, and is about the last of them in this book. Here, for once, I sense a slackening of control, as though the material were not thoroughly comprehended (and indeed, Le Guin's foreword to the story more than hints of uncertainties) but had to be written down because it was *there* and must be voided before it blocked the flow. I do not pretend to completely understand this story of an astronomer fated to live in the darkness of a mine. As with Lafferty's demented 'Con-

tinued on Next Rock', I feel I *almost* understand and then it slips from under my mental claw. In a month or two I shall read it again. In Le Guin territory, afterthoughts are in order once the tension has relaxed or the smile faded.

In 1973 'The Field of Vision' attacks a problem similar to that posed by Lem in *Solaris* and, as is typical of this lady, she caroms off it at an opposite angle to him. The problem, of course, concerns the human reaction to meeting with a fact which our senses cannot construe. Where the Lem answer, tailored to a satirical purpose, is one of endless intellectual and philosophic frustration (and, incidentally, allows no other), the Le Guin answer grapples with the problem instead of satirising the unhappily confronted. She suggests that the orientation of the mind will develop until the senses *can* construe the alien fact. Throughout her work the mind opens to challenge and difficulty, whereas Lem's satire — and for that matter, most satire — is postulated on the closed and unreceptive mind. (It seems to me that the problem itself may be unreal in the ways in which it has been presented, in that a fact inconstruable by our senses would probably be imperceptible to them, if only by reason of psychological refusal. The universe may well be jampacked with such items, which we are not capable — yet — of perceiving.) But the truth is that neither author has really produced an unassimilable fact; nor do I think the human imagination, in bondage to its senses, can produce one. How imagine the unimaginable? The question can be asked, but the model cannot be constructed. However, 'The Field of Vision' is a good story which conveys the strangeness of new experience better than most writers can manage; if the ending seems a trifle flip, at least it is logically possible.

Of the remaining three, one is a fantasy about trees which seems to me ingenious but pointless (anyone is at liberty to point out that I am a blind mole, unable to see the obvious) and one is the fabulous 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas'. There is deceptively little body to this story. It doesn't really contain a central incident, only a central and static situation. Its value lies in the arresting nature of the question, 'Are you prepared to base your happiness on the misery of another?' Think carefully about the actual condition of the world and your position in it before, secure in the consciousness of virtue, you answer No!

Finally, 'The Day Before the Revolution' seems to have been written specially for this volume. It is not magazine stuff, though Silverberg or Knight might well have snapped it up had they been given the chance. It is fiction, but not a story with a beginning, a plot and an end. It is a 'day in the life' — in the life of Odo, who sparked the revolution which gave birth to Anarres and *The Dispossessed* — and it fascinates by the obtrusion of a factor not heretofore outstanding in Le Guin's work: characterisation.

Now, a digression on the role of characterisation in fiction:

Reviewers have written a little breathlessly of the fine characterisation in the Le Guin novels but have stopped short of defining the fineness or giving examples. Here in Australia the Nova Mob and some others have complained of too little characterisation, but again have

been content with the statement and have not attempted deeper vision. I have always found the first reaction silly-worshipful and the second a little obtuse, possibly based on the idiotic stuff taught about 'characterisation' in school. I stand somewhere in the middle, neither praising nor damning but finding what is offered sufficient for the novelist's purpose.

'Purpose' is the operative word. Deep, intense, powerful characterisation is *not* a *sine qua non* of the novel in all its varieties. The action novel gets by on a trayful of stock types and would lose much of its punch if it attempted significantly more. The sex novel needs prancing genitalia and gets them; characters it can and does do without and, whether you approve of sex novels or not, the technique is correct for the purpose. Early science fiction almost did without characters beyond a routine hero and villain and an occasional 'lithe, nubile' heroine because the orientation of the stories was towards objects and events rather than people; the characters were subservient to the gee-whiz goings on. Again the technique was correct for the purpose; it was the purpose which was limited and outstayed its welcome, so that 'people' filtered into SF to populate the vacuum as the interests of writers became humanist rather than technical.

But one thing did not alter, and it is, I think, the thing which more than any other distinguishes the approach of SF from that of other fiction. The emphasis of SF is, by its very nature, centred upon *change*. Its characters are, in the main, acted upon by universal forces and happenings, and the world overview which is essential for the recording of such progressions can only accommodate representative types. The 'individual', thoroughly explored and presented, becomes a special case, suitable for the minutely detailed sociological examinations of non-SF but not applicable to the purposes of a fiction whose overview demands rumination on a racial and historical scale. In SF the characters represent facets of humanity at whatever crossroad the author has provided; they are acted upon and as representative humanity they react. It is a rare work of SF wherein character determines the direction and outcome of the novel. Even so flamboyant and memorable a personality as Gully Foyle is able to act only within the limits of a predetermined outcome. The possibility of failure was never in the conception, so that half the man is eternally missing. Gully does not *create* the situations of *The Stars My Destination* — they are quite blatantly created for him in the prologue and he is only what the incidents make him. But — he is a success because the presentation of him is judged exactly to fill the role. Gully is a lively puppet, but still a puppet. He is also precisely what was needed, which makes him a successful characterisation.

So, in SF character is subservient to other fictional requirements, and it is a myth propagated by unimaginative teaching that without deep and powerful characterisation a work of fiction is valueless. It won't reach the heights of Tolstoy or Dickens without it, but that is a far cry from being valueless. *Characterisation should occupy the position and prominence demanded by the overall scheme of the work*. Neither boringly and incompetently less nor fussily and pointlessly more.

The test of *adequate* characterisation is the reader's ability to accept the individual fully in the role pre-

sented.

The test of characterisation *in depth* is the reader's ability to imagine the individual in a context other than that provided by the author. For me, Le Guin fulfils that requirement as damned few others in the genre do. (As an afterthought, it may be the lack of flamboyance in her people that disappoints some to the point where they fail to see what is there; SF has been too much cursed with the unnecessarily and inconsequentially strange.)

End of digression.

But I have wondered at times: is she capable of the insight and evocation necessary for major characterisation?

And now can answer, yes.

'The Day Before the Revolution' is simply a character study of revolutionist Odo in old age, and it is a gem. A miniature only, but perfect in its way. It completes the book with the display of a fresh acquisition in the writer's literary toolroom.

It would be foolish to claim that this is one of the great SF author collections, but it is a good one. If its lows are low, its peaks are high and the general level of the

terrain is well above high tide. Between 1962 and 1975 Ursula Le Guin has travelled a rough road from hobbling promise to a proficient striding through every branch of her art (except comedy, almost totally absent).

Reading 'April in Paris' in 1962, one could not have forecast *The Dispossessed*. Reading it in 1975, one can just perceive that the possibility was there. Round about 1969, the synergistic fusion took place, but what sparked it? Le Guin herself may not know; if she does, perhaps she will tell us.

To sum up: Ursula Le Guin writes fantasy and straight SF with equal grace — and 'grace' is the merited word. Her ideas and treatments are original and her conclusions, however bizarre, are arrived at logically. She neither overwrites nor decorates unnecessarily; 'Nine Lives' and 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow' are lessons in how to write superior SF.

Among the stridencies and pretensions of contemporary SF, Le Guin's work stands out for its concern with quality and for the lack of strain with which quality is achieved. She follows the great classical tradition, not of science fiction but of all fiction.

— *SF Commentary* No. 44/45, December 1975

THOMAS M. DISCH I

Tomorrow is still with us

Reviewed:

334

by Thomas M. Disch

(Avon Books; 1974; 272 pp.)

(Sphere Books; 1974; 248 pp.)

My contention that SF is rejoining the so-called 'mainstream' of literature (which it never really separated from in the first place) is much strengthened by the feat of SF novelist Disch in writing a purely mainstream work in SF terms. Not only is *334* traditional in theme and development (though not in method) but it belongs to a definite 'mainstream' group: the kitchen-sink drama of the forties and fifties. So don't ever try to convince me that the wheel will not come full circle.

Let's get the reviewer's chore (description of the work) out of the way, then feel free to discuss the things that matter. No. 334 is a tenement building in the New York of the third decade of the twenty-first century. That time is fairly close to home; some who read this may well be around to compare Disch's vision with the reality (God, the bomb and molecular biology willing); in

general, his characters are perhaps our children's children. His period is about as different from ours in social terms (Disch shows little interest in merely technological change) as ours is from the third decade of this century; in fact, some of the resemblances are, to one who remembers that decade, startling. A fact to be set in its place later.

The structure of the work is highly individual. It begins with five novellas (about 10,000 words apiece), each one of which is concerned with a person or group dwelling in No. 334. The importance of these novellas is that they show the major characters operating *outside* 334, that is, in their *outward* relationship with the world. The variety here of style and treatment likewise shows Disch in many aspects of his art. (And 'art' — in its sense of superior creativity and technique — is a word I'll use for precious few SF writers. Ballard, occasionally Aldiss and — and . . . ?)

In the first tale, young Birdie Ludd has his troubles at the point where the educational system and the adult social system (which is, as always, a structure radically different from the adolescent one) begin their conflict in the nomansland of the late teens. His problems are

superficially different from yours today and mine yesterday but his attitudes, his angers and his errors, are eternal. While we writhe at his stupidity we remember that only a few years ago we also . . . Damn it!

In the second, Ab Holt, a hospital worker, becomes involved in anarchic comedy when one of his illegal sidelines comes apart on the reef of official routine. It is Disch's only essay, in this book, in risible farce, and we could do with more of the same; smiles are present in SF but laughter is rare.

In 'Everyday Life in the Later Roman Empire' we tour the inner space of Alexa, using one of the more ingenious escapist methods of SF, and dealing with reality between whiles.

'Emancipation' highlights some unexpected problems of sexual equality and provides a raucous answer which just might, in a few cases, be a real one.

Finally, 'Angouleme' finds youthful violence thinking itself out at a nodal point of personal development.

Then comes the novel, *334* (about 40,000 words), in which these characters, now adult, live out their dreary lives in the tenement, coping or not coping, dreaming or despairing, living as best they can or merely dying alive.

The novel requires a concentration not demanded by the novellas because of its involved but completely logical structure, which moves backwards and forwards in time as well as sideways from character to character. Here Disch deals with the inner selves of the people we have seen in their formative years in the novellas.

He tells no integrated story, but records how his major characters, freed of youth, come to terms with that middle-class world which is not poverty-stricken but has never enough, is not illiterate but has no useful knowledge. The conditions of his society are different from ours, the *mores* warped and redirected by forces which limit family size and living space but offer idiot solace in sexual freedom and palliatives and entertainment — drugs and TV instead of bread and circuses, with much the same resultant unrest that never reaches the cohesiveness of revolt. The people come to terms as we do and always did — by siding with the strength, by seeking refuge in intellectual attainment in order to ride above the jetsam, by rebelling until rebellion itself becomes a pointless exercise in noise, or by opting out even to the final option of suicide.

We know these people. Our daily newspapers are full of their bare bones; our fiction shudders to their internal grindings; our protesters state and overstate their cases on placards and walls; our social workers go into breakdown over the impossibility of alleviation or grow an official carapace in sheer self protection.

There is a sense in which Disch unrolls the panorama of the future and asks, 'So what's new?'

Is *334* therefore dull, unreadable, to be avoided? On the contrary, it is fascinating, eminently readable and an essential part of one's SF education. It is one of the products wherewith SF comes of age, establishes its credentials and claims a minor but genuine triumph in the field of modern fiction.

If it doesn't take out the Nebula Award for 1974 the SFWA will come under suspicion as a gaggle of impostors. I can't see it being a fan-popular book in the manner of most winners, but equally I can't see much

chance of a more important work coming to light in the meanwhile. It will be a vintage year in which another SF novel *deserves* to beat it. (Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*? Damned near, but not quite.)

A few lines back, I described *334* as important. It is important because it not only breaks new ground in SF but breaks it with the sureness of an excellent novelist. There are cavils, to be glanced at later, but in general it is a work of substance and truth, of artistic and moral integrity and of both dramatic and comic power.

It is important because it takes a common SF theme — the if-this-goes-on type of future — strips it of gimmickry and genuinely *looks* through the time-telescope.

It is important because it challenges what we arrogantly term the 'mainstream' novel on one of its favourite grounds — the realistic middle-class novel — and demonstrates that the SF approach can provide a fresh statement without the aid of spaceships, telepaths, super-drugs or gross overwriting.

This demonstration is the major consideration in a purely literary sense.

In detail, what has Disch done? He has simply written a novel of everyday life tomorrow. Do you feel, perhaps, that I am ignoring such stories as Silverberg's evocations of vast conurbs and termitary conditions or Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!*? Not a bit of it. These books were strictly artificial creations, bearing little relation to the realities of human reaction or to the simple probability of their postulated conditions ever arising; and they were plotted and structured in that time-honoured fashion which keeps good SF ideas shackled in the second or third rank of appreciation.

Disch's novel has nothing in common with such works. It has much in common with the plays of Arnold Wesker, the slum novels of Farrell (*Studs Lonigan*) and the observed reality of Burgess or Darryl Ponicsan. (And if you don't know about Ponicsan, get hold of *The Last Detail* and read it. Forget the film, which is only excellent.)

The points around which Disch builds his future are sparse but deep-reaching:

Overpopulation has caused the termite structures of huge tenement buildings not only to remain as part of the city scene but to proliferate.

Family size is regulated by law, and floor space by an agency called, sinisterly enough, MODICUM, which ensures that everyone has at least the minimum necessary accommodation. 'Minimum', unfortunately, cannot be varied much for the needs of individuals.

The educational system is hinted at rather than discussed. It seems to be more efficient than ours at force-feeding but also to offer considerable variety of opportunity; the children appear to mature intellectually earlier than ours.

All kinds of marriage, homo and hetero, are recognised by the state.

And TV entertainment of high emotional content floods the networks day and night, invading conversation, dreams, attitudes and thought.

These are small (compared to SF's wilder extrapolations — so-called), almost expectable mutations in our lifestyle. We know them from way back. What we have

not known before is Disch's probing, both delicate and indelicate, into the results of these moderate changes, and it is because of this that we are presented with something old in fiction but blindingly new in SF.

Consider Mrs Hanson, dispossessed by the MODICUM she thought was supposed to look after her, her furniture piled on the footpath and herself setting light to it as a funeral pyre, pushed by her outdated ideas of the past, pulled by the unrecognised realities of the present and repelled by the eternally threatening future which everyone recognises and pretends does not exist — until the moment of apparition.

Or Little Mister Kissy Lips, at twelve years old planning his first murder (his rite of passage) and defeated by the simple fact of adults being adults and bearing mysterious authority which freezes intention.

Or Birdie Ludd raging against the 'personal rating' system which denies him marriage, with never a coherent appreciation of any lack in himself.

Or Juan killing himself because his vintage car works and his marriage doesn't, although he loves his wife and she him . . .

These are today's cases seen through tomorrow's eye, not the reverse, which is so much more usual in SF.

Nor are these the common ingredients of SF, which shuns reality like the plague, but I feel it safe to prophesy that more and more they will become such. Disch has attempted a work of considerable difficulty, but now that it is done and a template technique made available, others will think along these adult lines. (Others still will see the exploitable possibilities and set about obscuring the values Disch has revealed by cheapening them for mass consumption. It always happens; it is a recognised penalty of talent.)

It is, I suppose, a fair question if someone asks at this point, 'But why the fuss, man? What's the value of this Dischy exercise? Why does it matter more than any other exercise in kitchen-sinkery?'

The answer lies in the nature of art and the pursuit of artistry.

Art, which has problems enough transforming/disfiguring/rejuvenating/obscuring/new-splendouring its current surface, has had to take the future into consideration. Literature began such consideration, drama took it up swiftly, and now the plastic arts and music are struggling (unsuccessfully as yet, but art is longer than life) to do likewise. All of this is a growing consciousness of what many philosophers knew long ago: that the contemplation of time is not of time-now or time-when but of time of the totally present part of intellectual experience. Tomorrow is as important as today, though less easy to observe, and at least as important as that yesterday which will row dim if efforts are not made to preserve it. Both are parts of our 'passage' through time and must be regarded, existentially, as permanently present. (You are not asked to agree factually with this, but to consider it carefully as a function of our self-understanding as a species.)

To realise this theoretically is an easy exercise, but to

practise it in aesthetic expression is not. But Disch has succeeded, almost miraculously, in seeing yesterday, today and tomorrow in a single vision of a single time. He has produced a work whose essence is 'for all time' rather than simply this day and age.

Please don't take the quotation as meaning that I am confusing him with Shakespeare and Homer, but the fact is that *334* could have been read fifty years ago with the same understanding we can bring to it today, and I will stick my neck out to say that its meanings will still be current (even if the novel itself is not) long after humanity has solved superficial problems of overpopulation and administrative desperation. The deeply personal problems — of bias, loss, failure, concern, desire, triumph and surrender — are eternal; only the physical details change. (Would the Roman legion cited for decimation see its fate as any less serious than that of the nation shuddering at its first fusion bomb? Try thinking of yourself as the tenth legionary.)

All problems are in the long run personal.

I repeat that Disch has succeeded in seeing today through tomorrow's eyes. That they turn out to be little different (but that little is crucial) from today's eyes is the measure of authorial honesty; anyone could have thrown in the additional touches which so often debase SF into fantasy, gimmickry or melodrama, but Disch did not. He stuck to his vision.

I doubt if he will be much thanked for his honesty, save perhaps by a few critics and some of the more sensitive writers, but I believe and hope that *334* will remain in print, as Wells remains in print, in spite of all who did not hail it or even read it on its first appearance.

Disch is, of course, one of the unhappily termed 'new wave' writers ('So what's new?'), and now that wave is settling to a groundswell he has nearly justified all that movement's excesses and stupidities by producing something utterly fresh in SF. Indeed, in literature.

Disch has contributed, not tremendously but quite definitely, to literature.

I wrote earlier about having a few carping notes to record. So I have, mainly about style, but have changed my mind about recording them. Read *334* and decide for yourself what they might have been. Read it. Go on, read it!

For myself, I intend to badger my *non*-SF-reading friends into trying it. Chances are they will think better of it than will the great mass of fans.

Finally, you will have noticed that both American and English paperbacks are available. The English edition is cheaper, uses better paper and is better bound.

So buy the dearer, hard-mucilage-bound American edition because it has a prime virtue in a far superior and more intelligent layout. This is a rare novel wherein layout, divisions and chapter headings really matter, and for once the Yanks have done a more sensitive, more readable job.

— *SF Commentary* No. 41/42, February 1975

THOMAS M. DISCH II

The best short stories of Thomas M. Disch



Thomas M. Disch, Brighton World SF Convention, 1979
(Photo: Roger Weddall)

Reviewed:

Getting Into Death

by Thomas M. Disch

(Alfred A. Knopf; 1976; 227 pp.)

This collection, thank the Lord, does without one of those idiotic and fawning ‘Introductions’ in which some other member of the SF in-group slavers over his idol of the moment. For money, of course. It’s just as well, because such old-time introducers as Asimov, Ellison, Pohl *et al.* would have to eat their ideas to do justice to this lot.

The SF writer who ventures into the non-SF world of the ‘mainstream’, stripped of all supporting gimmickry and technicolored backgrounds, finds himself in unmanageable country, forced to depend on naked skill. Dick, Schachner, Herbert, Van Vogt, Brunner and many more have tried it — and their limitations were brutally plain when they were stripped of their fancy dress. Aldiss succeeded, but he was always a mainstreamer using the SF mode; only Gene Wolfe has seemed deliriously triumphant with *Peace*. The switch from SF to mainstream is a deadly method of sorting the men from the boys.

Even R. A. Lafferty, whose kaleidoscopic imagination makes a thousand mysteries dance upon a pinpoint of seductive illogic, is less effective when, as novelist, he has to grapple with plot and extended conspiracy. Real life, one fears, is not for such as he.

What, then, should be expected from old Grim Realist Tom Disch, who played with some of the facts of

life long ago in *Camp Concentration* and extrapolated them boldly in the more recent *334*? More and grimmer realism? The answer is: expect what you will, but you’ll get something else. SF? Not quite. Realistic fiction? Not quite that, either. Romance? Just a touch — of a sort. Fantasy? Yes — no — maybe. Some purely personal concoction, perhaps? *Yes!*

Somewhere between SF and the ‘mainstream’, but closer to the ‘mainstream’, hangs *Getting into Death*, like Mahomet’s coffin swaying to unexpected breezes. In the title story, a terminally ill lady novelist discovers that her romantic twitterings in print had been closer to the point than she had imagined — which isn’t nearly as important as the in-depth study of a shallow mind which had always considered itself competent and incisive and superior, and now wants to rejoin humanity. Outside Kate Wilhelm, I can think of no one else in the field who could have conceived the story, let alone written it. And she wouldn’t have done it in just this way; her touch is heavier than Disch’s.

‘The Asian Shore’ was published as SF in *Orbit 6* (ed. Damon Knight), but is as much SF as Billy Bunter is Falstaff. It is a *doppelgänger* story — well, no, it is really a transmigration story — or, rather, it is a story of a personality finding its proper home — that is, it is an archetypal mystery seen, as it were, from the inside . . . Do you understand what I hopelessly fail to convey? Of course you don’t, any more than I do. So get the book and read it, and ponder for a week or two on just what *does* take place, in physical and psychological terms, in this impenetrable but riveting story.

Then do the same for ‘Let us Quickly Hasten to the Gate of Ivory’, which is a lesson in the beautiful writing of utterly simple prose.

But the collection is not only an intellectual delight. ‘Death and the Single Girl’, ‘Apollo’, ‘Displaying the Flag’ and a couple of others are just good entertainment, and ‘The Joycelin Shrager Story’ is as cynically funny as anything I’ve seen in the last few decades, with an unfunny reminder of inescapable fact at the finish.

There are two quasi-autobiographical stories which are only trendy rather than effective, a batch of technical *tours de force* and — yes! — ‘The Planet Arcadia’ which alone in this book is SF, no matter how you define the term.

Tom Disch no longer needs SF. It is SF now that needs him.

— *SF Commentary*, No. 48/49/50, Oct.–Dec. 1976

Traps

Reviewed:

The Fifth Head of Cerberus

by Gene Wolfe

(Gollancz; 1973; 244 pp.)

Bruce gave me no happiness by sending me *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* for review. For one thing, I don't much enjoy reviewing, and for another, it required only a few pages of reading to make me aware that here was something unusual; at the end of half an hour I felt queasily that it was also loaded with traps for the unwary reviewer. The only thing to do with such a work is to read it once for general impression, let it simmer awhile, and read it again for detailed understanding — knowing that the second attempt may be drudgery. As it happens, it wasn't, and indeed left a suspicion that a third reading in a year or so may reveal much that I have so far missed.

And so to the review — with the proviso that the book is one of the more complex products of SF, open to a deal of opinion and interpretation.

The Fifth Head of Cerberus is not a novel in the commonest sense of the term: a progression of events occurring to a specific group of characters, leading to the discussion or statement of a theme.

Superficially it is a group of related novellas, and there is some internal evidence (but not conclusive evidence) that the three were not conceived as a whole. This, if true, might account for some of the peculiarities of structure which make the work difficult to grasp whole at a first reading. But the final interrelationship is intimate, and the result is not a set of variations on a theme but a total structure wherein the theme is observed in various lights and perspectives.

The theme itself flits in and out of the three stories, always there but never obtrusive, almost as though Wolfe himself had only observed its implications and ramifications as he worked, and followed it to the end in order to discover for himself just what he was doing. This sort of speculation is apt to be utterly incorrect, but I include it in an attempt to convey something of the exploratory feeling of the book. The final impression is not of planning but of a line of thought pursued to a satisfactory conclusion.

Discussion of theme must wait on some description of the action and plan of the book.

In the general setting, twin planets — Sainte Croix and Sainte Anne — circle a common centre of gravity in orbit around a far star. They were settled by the French (I don't think the nationality has significance, but with this book it doesn't pay to be sure), who destroyed the native race of Sainte Anne in typical white-race fashion, moved on to Sainte Croix, and were

themselves superseded in power by the flux of history. Folk lore says that the abos (this is Wolfe's word, not merely our Australian contraction) of Sainte Anne were shape-changers, able to assume the appearance of others, but it is held that they are extinct.

The first, the title story, is set on Sainte Croix, a backwater planet where starships still call but civilisation lingers in a queer mixture of spasmodic technology — mainly biological — and an atmosphere of the eighteenth century; I found myself thinking of old New Orleans, although I have never seen that city, save in Hollywood version. That this atmosphere is so powerful is one of many tributes that might be paid to Wolfe's writing, for he does not set out obviously to create it.

On Sainte Croix a boy grows up in revolting circumstances. With a brother, who turns out to be not quite a brother, he is raised in the expensive brothel by means of which his 'father' (not quite a father) finances his biological research.

His other companions are biosculptured harlots, a crippled 'aunt' (a term of convenience) and a robot tutor with a unique personality. Since Sainte Croix has a slave economy, his upbringing is exotically unreal, especially as his 'father' subjects him to a brutal and repellent training and education. The boy's contacts with any real world are minimal.

As he comes to maturity he deduces the truth, that he is the fifth head of Cerberus, the fifth in a line of cloned individuals.

And here Wolfe quietly states his theme, so quietly that almost it could pass the reader by:

If a clone be taken from a man, does the new individual become his son? His twin? Or merely an extension — an extra body and brain?

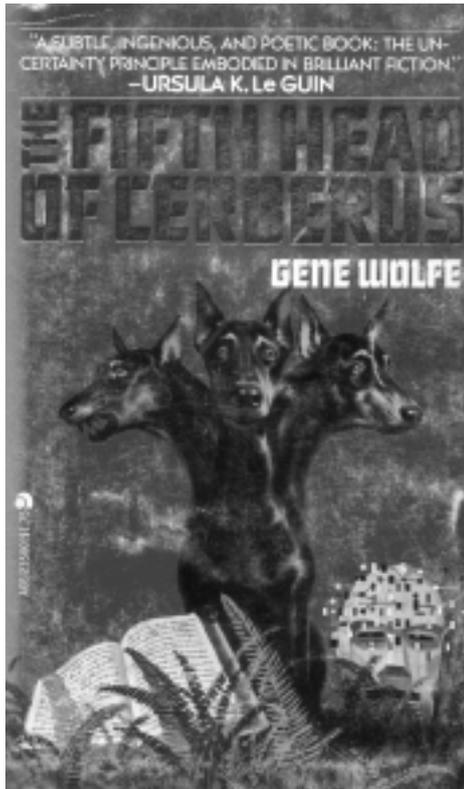
Who is he? Or what?

Wolfe is posing the old problem of identity (so popular among novelists since the bedevilled Kafka formulated it with the terror of despair) and posing it with a force and ingenuity unequalled since Budrys put it with much violence in *Rogue Moon*.

While there is more than one of him, and neither is the whole he, the boy lives in a psychological limbo. His escape solution is to kill his 'father', just as his 'father' had killed the 'father' before him.

Is this truly a solution? Read the book and make up your own mind. The novelist's business is to make sure a problem is understood, not to provide slick answers.

Part II is called "A Story," by J. V. Marsch, and is an ingeniously designed fiction within a fiction. It has its origin in an incident in Part I, wherein an anthropologist, Marsch, makes enquiries concerning Veil's Hypothesis. This is a theory that the original inhabitants of Sainte Anne, where the first colonists landed, were shape-changers and that they, instead of being wiped



out, in fact took the places of the colonists after wiping *them* out.

Part II, then, purports to be a fiction (but is it in fact a fiction? — this is one of the book's minor problems) based on Veil's Hypothesis, and tells the tale of a young . . . man? shape-changer? something else? . . . coming to maturity in the days after the first colonisation. He moves among various types of Hillmen and Marshmen and some mysterious beings called Shadow Children, who may or may not be descendants of the shape-changers. They themselves do not certainly know. They have lost identity because, when one becomes another, is he then the second man, or the first in the second, or both or neither?

This aspect of the theme is beautifully stated in a short scene wherein an ancient Shadow Child bewails the loss of an identity he cannot be sure he ever possessed.

Part III returns to the present to tell how anthropologist Marsch locates a youngster reputed to be a genuine descendant of the shape-changers and goes with him into the wastelands of Sainte Anne to seek the aboriginals in whose existence others do not believe.

The Marsch who goes out is not the Marsch who returns, and the takeover by the shape-changer boy (who wants to be an anthropologist and thus neatly becomes one) is so subtly managed that after two readings I am still not sure that I can place the precise point in the text where one becomes aware that it has happened. It is achieved without description, by a gradual change of style and a gentle phasing in of revelatory references.

Pseudo-Marsch voyages to Sainte Croix and is promptly arrested for the murder of the brothel-keep-

ing clone who was in fact murdered by his 'son' in Part I.

Sainte Croix is very much a police state, and once in prison 'Marsch' has no hope of release as he becomes a political pawn — as he becomes something less than that, something known to more cynical regimes than ours as a non-person.

So the final irony is achieved. The shape-changer who stole an identity has lost even the one he stole. He has become nothing at all.

Behind, around and paralleling the identity theme is the slow revelation of the real state of anthropological affairs on the twin planets, and it is not for me to tell you the answers because the business of ferreting them out is one of the major charms of the book. The answers are there, but Wolfe does not throw them at you; he must be read with care and attention because sometimes the clues lie in a word or a phrase buried in a sentence ostensibly about something else. He has not offered a baffling, exhausting puzzle, but rather has laid his trail with marvellous care so that there is an exhilaration in keeping up with the pace he sets.

Please don't feel that in outlining the major plot points I have revealed all that is worth telling, for this is a work fantastically rich in subplot and detail. There has been no mention yet of Mr Million or the criminal children or the Observatory of trees or the fighting slaves or the fabulous crippled lady or the mysterious person called LastVoice — or of a hundred other attractions, decorations and devices. Or of some minor puzzles such as: who wrote the story which is Part II — Marsch or pseudo-Marsch? And is it truth or conjecture? (The answers are there for the careful reader.)

James Blish has called this a 'complex, highly original and moving novel' — 'novel' for want of a better word — and I can only add that it is a very beautiful one. It is like nothing else I can recall in science fiction.

And yet —

The danger in a review of this kind is to leave the impression that here is perfection, simply because one has been seduced by the fascinations of novelty. The book is indeed far from perfect. It is in many senses unnecessarily complex, there is some literarily tactless tuckerisation in Part I which jars and irritates, and Part II is written in that fake simplistic style perfected by Kipling to cast an aura of romance over his *Jungle Books*.

And yet —

It is a lovely book. The identity theme is not one which has ever interested me because it seems a philosophical dead end — a meaningless question shouted into the void, like 'What was before God?' or 'How can an infinite creation have a beginning?' But while Wolfe casts his spell I *was* interested in it, vitally. And that is one of the things good writing is about. If I was sucked in, I was sucked in gladly, and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* takes my present vote as one of the most attractive of all SF books written. It belongs to no group or sub-genre. It is unique. Little SF stands the test of time, but this one may. I hope so.

— *SF Commentary* No. 39, November 1973

GENE WOLFE II

The remembrance of things present

Reviewed:

Peace

by Gene Wolfe

(Harper & Row; 1975; 264 pp.)

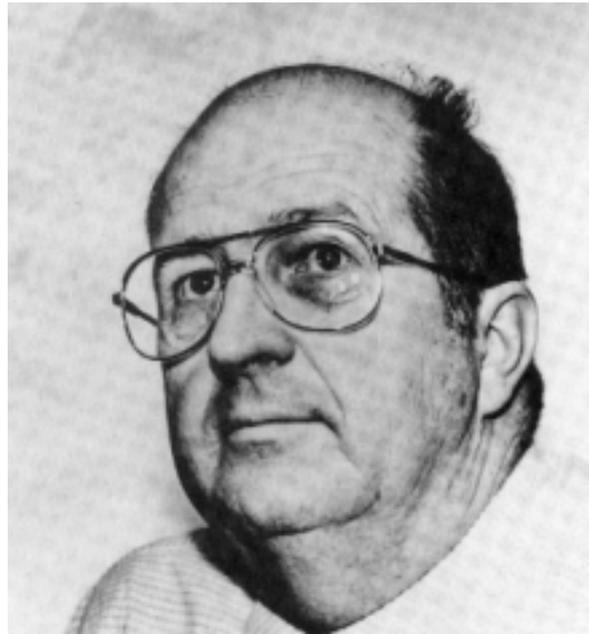
In 1914 a man named Prinzip fired, in Sarajevo, a shot which rang, as they say, round the world. Two years before I was born, that man's action determined much of the course of my life — and yours. With a simple contraction of the index finger he precipitated World War I, and the political stupidities arising from the Allied victory (if 'victory' has any specific meaning) gave rise to World War II, which effectively ended the famous Depression Years, set me and few million other wide-eyed innocents to discovering the degradation of mindless conflict and produced a syndrome of politico-scientific terrors and rivalries which culminated in the nuclear flash at Alamogordo. Which in turn . . .

Wars and nuclear flashes are big news, but what of the little news? World War II ended, for me, when I was discharged from the army, to the relief of both parties, in 1945. I have since spent thirty years growing out of the world's trauma and trying to grow into whatever I might have been if Prinzip had never lived. Impossible, of course; 'might have been' cannot be discovered. But I wrote a war novel back in the fifties, thinking that with its publication I had laid the ghost of the locust years, that that part of my life had ended at last.

A foolishness, because nothing ends. It attenuates, reaching asymptotically towards an unattainable zero, but never ends. Last August I found myself in a fleeting moment of excited, almost hostile disagreement with Ursula Le Guin at dinner in a Melbourne cafe, when she spoke of her involvement with anti-war protest and I affirmed that while the protesters were right to take their stand, they hated war for all the wrong reasons, that the dreadfulness of the psychic degradation in soldiers far outweighed death, pain and destruction. She disagreed. We exchanged glances — and dropped the subject.

Sixty-one years ago, Prinzip helped cause that moment. Nothing ends. I am not free of him. Nor is she. Nor are you who read this.

Somewhere in America a man named Gene Wolfe knows this fact of interlocking endlessness and has written a novel about it. I don't recall that the word 'war' is ever mentioned in it, but its title is *Peace*. It probably refers to peace of mind, but I will not presume to make final judgments of meaning in this very beautiful, lumi-



Gene Wolfe (Photo: Cathy Ackerman)

nous, fantastic, far-removed, utterly realistic novel.

It is not science fiction, though it has much to do with the conception of time-in-the-round, time in which present and past are one, existing *now* and still existing tomorrow.

It is not science fiction, but it is by the man who wrote that thoughtful, probing *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, and is as much greater than that book as that is greater than, say, *The Skylark of Space*.

It is not science fiction. So read it and discover something of what the science fiction mind has to offer the mainstream — and what the mainstream (how I detest that double-crossing, double-talking word with its background of inverted snobbery, but what better have we, in our SF paranoia?) has to offer to science fiction.

Alden Weer, born at the turn of the century and now grown old, suffers a stroke. His thought turns not to Last Things, which bother him little, but to the eternal fact of his existence. He is not concerned that his life is going out, but that it has been lived and in its entirety exists for ever in the matrix of time. He remembers, not seeking some philosophic summing up or complacent pattern or justification of himself to God, but a recognition of the shape of his term on Earth.

Never in his seventy or so years does he leave the environs of his small mid-western town, yet his story moves out across the map of America, even crosses the sea with a fine tertiary tendril, sees and hears and touches and returns to where he sits, wealthy and alone, in his vast old house, remembering.

Nothing is lost:

When I designed the entranceway of this house, I tried to recreate the foyer of Blaine's — not its actuality in a tape measure sense, but its actuality as I remembered it; why should not my memory, which still exists, which still 'lives and breathes and has its being', be less actual, less real, than a physical entity now demolished and irrecoverable?

Between this paragraph and the last, I went to look for that foyer . . .

Each room in the house is a reproduction of another person's room which has impressed itself on Alden's memory; the whole structure is an *aide-mémoire*, a filing cabinet of experience unlost. Like his memory, it is vast and rambling and he loses his way in it as easily as in his recollections. He sees a room which will reconstruct a sequence and cannot find it, but finds another which presents a different sequence, but one which finally leads to, impinges upon, enters the one he wanted — because a life is a whole life, not a thing of parallels and overpasses and stopped ends.

He finds marvels in his memory and relates them for us — not always accurately but as best he can, fancy being as much part of reality as the hitching posts we call facts. Sometimes he finds whole stories. The book is a gold mine of short stories woven into the tapestry — not inserted into it but part of it. There is the China Egg Story and all the consequences that arose from it, as well as the consciousness of consequences which tried to arise but did not. There is the Chemist's Story, which did not happen to Alden at all but eventually entered his life, many years later, by way of an unexpected ripple. There is the Buried Treasure Story and an Arabian Nights Fantasy, as well as a Chinese Morality and a Story About Forgery which lays out a whole jigsaw of Questioned Morality.

And every now and then there is something that is not quite a story, just an incident, which illuminates a corner of the human cellar and terrifies with knowledge of the narrowness of the gap between fancy and fact. Such as this:

(I know there are limits to be respected regarding the length of quotes; it says so in the front of every novel. But we must, just this once, push the boundary a little far for this really beautiful excerpt.)

Young Alden, aged about ten, is with his Aunt and her anthropologist lover, who is about to lower himself over a cliff to investigate a cave.

Then, with a sliding loop round his waist, he lowered himself from the edge, fending off the stones of the bluff with his legs much as though he were walking.

'Well,' my aunt said, standing at the edge to watch him, with the toes of her boots (this I remember vividly) extending an inch or more into space, 'he's gone, Den. Shall we cut the rope?'

I was not certain that she was joking, and shook my head.

'Vi, what are you two chattering about up there?'

The professor's voice was still loud, but somehow sounded far away.

'I'm trying to persuade Den to murder you. He has a lovely scout knife — I've seen it.'

'And he won't do it?'

'He says not.'

'Good for you, lad.'

'Well, really, Robert, why shouldn't he? There you hang like a great, ugly spider, and all he has to do is cut the rope. It would change his whole life like a religious conversion — haven't you ever read Dostoyevsky? And if he doesn't do it he'll always wonder if it wasn't partly because he was afraid.'

'If you do cut it, Alden, push her over afterward, won't you? No witnesses.'

'That's right,' my aunt Olivia told me, 'you could say we made a suicide pact.'

Frightened, I shook my head again, and heard Professor Peacock call, 'There is a cave here, Vi.'

'Do you see anything?'

He did not answer and I, determined to be at least as daring as my aunt, walked to the edge and looked over; the rope hung slack, moving when my foot touched it. Trying to sound completely grown up, I asked, 'Did he fall?'

'No, silly, he's in the cave, and we'll have to wait up here for ever and ever before he'll come up and tell us what he found.'

She had lowered her voice, and I followed suit. 'You didn't really want me to cut the rope, did you, Aunt Olivia?'

'I don't suppose I cared a great deal whether you did or not, Den, but I would have stopped you if you'd tried — or didn't you know that?'

If I had been older, I would have told her I did, and I would — after the fashion of older people — have been telling the truth. I had sensed that cutting the rope was only a joke: I had also sensed that beneath the joke there was a strain of earnestness, and I was not mature enough yet to subscribe fully to that convention by which such underlying, embarrassing thoughts are ignored — as we ignore the dead trees in a garden because they have been overgrown with climbing roses or morning glories at the urging of the clever gardener. I continued to wait thus, embarrassed and silent, until the professor's head appeared above the edge of the bluff and he scrambled up to stand with us.

Alden Weer is not simply a recorder of incidents; he is an observer of the appearance and disappearance of strands in the web as they wind over and under the warp of events. So: when he is a little boy a group of ladies make idle mention of a piece of buckskin — perhaps 100 pages further on, the piece of buckskin reappears as part of a snippet of local history — leading to a tale of buried treasure — and a burgeoning love where greed soils innocence — and, curiously, to a matter of faked manuscripts — which in turn gives rise to an unexpected offer of sex from a teenager to the now

ageing Alden Weer — which then . . .

That is not unduly complex as novels go, but it becomes miraculous when you realise that each of these incidents is central to another part of the pattern, that incidents, stories, fantasies and meanings crisscross endlessly, that author Wolfe is telling half a dozen major tales at once and that each is dependent on the others for its existence.

Peace is not simply the tale of one man's life (*that* kind of fictional biography has been done to death since *David Copperfield*) but an examination of the complexity of existence, of its interaction and connectivity. It is not a statement of the shape of life but of the marvellous topology which is independent in each of us yet inseparably connected to all life and all time.

It is no news to the follower of Wolfe's stories that he can on occasion write superlatively well. In *Peace* he does not rise to occasions but writes with a reticent, wondering beauty throughout. Here is a childhood Christmas evoked in long, smooth sentences recalling the easy precision of Henry James in his middle period of unmatched grace:

(Eight-year-old Alden has wakened in the night and seen a light under the parlour door.)

Whether I thought it was light from the isinglass window of the stove, or that someone had left a lamp burning, or that it was the sun in an east window — for I was firmly convinced, remember, that it was morning — I did not stop to speculate. I opened the door (not with a knob that turned, as we had at home — as we had also gaslights and only used kerosene when a light had to be carried about, so that I thought, when I first came, that my grandfather's house was in a constant state of emergency — but with a strange latch that lifted to the downward pressure of my thumb) and as I did so the soft yellow light, as soft as a two-day-old chick, as soft as the blossom of a dandelion and more radiant, came pouring out, and I saw to my astonishment that the Christmas-tree candles were all lit, each standing erect as its own flame near the tip of a limb, a white specter crowned with fire.

Lovely, isn't it? One could quote forever, but two more short pieces must suffice. Here is one of many moments of precise, emotion-loaded description, simple and unremarkable in individual words, but sharp

and memorable in the dramatic matching of images:

It grew steadily darker and colder, and a wind rose. I saw something bright, the only colourful thing I had seen in the garden except for the breast feathers of the dead bird, blowing across the path. I ran and caught it, and found that it was broken paper lantern.

And here is one to show that the quirky thinking of the science fiction writer is not much overlaid by the concerns of the 'straight' novelist: (Weer is talking to the faker of books.)

'You say that the title means "The Book That Binds the Dead?"'

'Yes. It is a volume of necromancy — among other things.'

'Isn't there a danger that someone will really try to do whatever it is the book indicates they should?'

'They may fail, Mr Weer. Magic is an unreliable thing.'

'It seems to me that the danger lies in the harm they may do in failing.'

'I would worry about their succeeding, if I were you. It may not be as easy to hold the dead down as we think.'

It would be simple to go on revealing small glories ('small' because *Peace* is for the lover of good fiction, not the brass-throated stuff of which million-sellers are made) indefinitely. I could also list minor weaknesses, and feel only impatient with myself for bothering. I have tried instead to transmit something of the inward, complex, quiet excitement the novel communicated to me.

However, since I haven't written a word about structure, symbolic metaphor, characterisation and all the technical what-have-you of novelising, it may be thought that these things are non-existent in *Peace*. Be assured they are very much existent, but that I prefer not to insult a minor masterpiece and a genuine literary experience by dissecting it.

All right. Just one note. On characterisation:

Three weeks after finishing the book I can close my eyes and name, visualise and psychologically describe seventeen distinct persons from *Peace*. I know, because I have just done it.

When did you last read a novel you could do that for?

— *SF Commentary* No. 44/45, December 1975

SF COMMENTARY — NOT THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Before I receive emails telling me that this is not the Thirtieth Anniversary Edition of *SF Commentary*, because such an edition should have been dated January 1999, let me reassure you that I know this already. This issue was all set to appear in January 1999, but Real Life, in the shape of Paying Work, got in the way. In August 1999, I was one week away from finishing this issue when Aussiecon 3, the World SF Convention held in Melbourne, got in the way. I had to sit down to write two speeches, walk around Melbourne with invading Britons, hurtle around the Convention Centre for five days, socialise for a few days more, then settle down to the mountain of Paying Work that was sitting on the desk. The life of a fanzine editor, especially one who never quite publishes a fanzine, can be exciting. Last week was my first free week since then. Hence this Thirtieth Anniversary Edition, dated October 2000. What comes next? Not more 100-page issues. I've been waiting several years for the long breaks I need to produce monster *SFCs* and *TMRs*. Instead . . .? You'll see. The next few Gillespiezines will come as much of a surprise to you as they will to me. As always, I have Big Plans.

— Bruce Gillespie, 24 September 2000

MANIFESTO

Frederik Pohl as a creator of future societies

1 A failure of science fiction

Ben Bova, until recently editor of the magazine *Analog*, wrote in an essay entitled 'The Role of Science Fiction': '... to describe possible future societies and the problems lurking ahead is not enough. The writer of science fiction ... must show how human beings can and do literally create these worlds.'¹

The italics are Bova's and one can only approve his emphasis. A society or culture depicted as without provenance, existing in a historical vacuum, has no validity; it should, in honesty, be offered as fantasy rather than as science fiction. For a variant or suppositious society to impress as an intellectual experience, or even as rational entertainment, the reader must be provided with sufficient information in the text to enable him to answer the fair question: 'How did this culture come into existence, and can its continued existence be rationalised?' Where the text provides no answer the reader cannot be blamed for deciding that the work is trivialised by lack of logical content.

The remainder of Bova's essay affirms his faith that science fiction fulfils his italicised requirement, and it is notable that his own fiction scrupulously does so. However, fifty years of familiarity with the field leave me unconvinced that any but a small minority of writers pay more than lip service to the ideal. Science fiction's often noisy pretensions to excellence in the conception of alternative, future or extraterrestrial societies collapse badly in the area covered by Bova's dictum.

This essay will offer a short survey of the future or author-created society in the fiction of the past in order to establish the common modes of imaginative society-creation, a necessarily selective indication of the usage of these and other modes in the present day, followed by a more detailed examination of several works by a major science fiction writer whose novels and stories centre largely on the presentation of future societies.

2 The tradition of created societies in science fiction

It is possible to make a case for defining science fiction (ignoring the huge mass of adventure romances which wear the trappings of science fiction but belong, at bottom, to other and older genres) as: the fiction of change and the effects of change on human society. A few rogues and mutants will burst such parameters but most science fiction with any literary or intellectual

force (and why should we consider any other?) depends for its interest on precisely this consideration of change and effect, the relevance to the present human condition which makes it worth a reader's attention.

The most acclaimed, most long-lived, most discussed and most financially successful (to offer the spectrum of value judgment) of science fiction works have been those which used the 'change and effect' formula deliberately, concentrating their attention on the projection of social change and on *showing how human beings can and do create these worlds*.

Though Thomas More's *Utopia*,² published in 1516, cannot be called science fiction in the modern sense, it was the first significant work to use the fictional form for consideration of a possible alternative culture, contrasting what *might be* with what *is*, with the *might be* justified by logical argument or inference.

More's concern was social and political but, 110 years later, Francis Bacon added the scientific element in *New Atlantis*,³ a work of similar concerns but very different philosophy.

With content and intellectual method established, utopian programs flowed from many pens, featuring wish fulfilment rather than logical rigour. Most vanished from sight and memory, but in 1888 Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*⁴ signalled a return to the basic mode and added a predictive element, using a setting more than a century in the author's future and observing change through the eyes of a nineteenth-century protagonist, allowing direct confrontation of ideas.

A more subtly presented thesis, better plotted and characterised, closer to the classic requirements of narrative fiction, appeared in 1899. In *The Sleeper Awakes*,⁵ H. G. Wells introduced the extrapolative method. Unlike More and Bellamy, he did not preach an ideal but based his future society on the observed trends of the day, as did Aldous Huxley when, in 1932, his *Brave New World*⁶ raised howls of protest at the vision of the future he offered a complacent public. His contribution was the savagely satirical mode so prevalent in the science fiction magazines of the fifties and sixties.

These five books, aside from having established a continuing tradition, have in common the virtues of interest and relevance which have outlived their generations; all are easily available and are widely read today. Each of them fulfils the letter of the Bova requirement.

Each entertains by its projection of the unfamiliar, and engages lasting attention by its appeal to the logic and common sense of the reader. Though written over a span of centuries they are relevant to this world; they are not ephemeral; they remain resistant to the tide of modern science fiction, running to thousands of titles a year, which washes round but never over them.

3 The creation of futures in contemporary science fiction

Given the existence of a firm tradition of science-fictional creation (the books cited above form only a selection of those which could be adduced) it might reasonably be expected that the present-day explosion of science fiction writing would either extend and improve on this foundation or discard it in favour of some more useful basis. What seems to have happened is that a small number of responsible writers have extended the range of the tradition without bringing to it anything fundamentally new, while the great majority have either paid lip service without much genuine effort at creation or have discarded all pretence of reality or relevance in order to let imagination run unchecked by reason or any other limitation.

This last group will be ignored here; our business is not with romantic fantasy, whose justifications are emotional rather than logical. Romance has an honourable place in fiction, but consideration here is for the novel which aims to feed the mind as well as entertain it, as well as with the more specious novel which gives only the appearance of doing so.

The range of society-building tradition has been extended, in the past five decades, to include a number of sub-genres. The post-disaster novel (beginning, for most knowledgeable readers, with S. Fowler Wright's *Deluge*⁷ and George Stewart's *Earth Abides*⁸) rarely does more than follow the *Robinson Crusoe* archetype in charting the progress of people reduced to living as best they can and preserving cultural decencies as they face the task of rebuilding civilisation; little social creativity is offered by the author on this well-trodden path. The more imaginative post-nuclear-disaster story, replete with mutant telepaths, two-headed monsters and evolutionary regressives, is genetic balderdash produced by writers uninterested in any check of reference texts (which contain material for biological forecasts far superior to simple monster-making), and is better passed over by criticism.

A few remarkable totally alien, non-human societies have been created. Notable examples are Isaac Asimov's *The Gods Themselves*⁹ and, more recently, James Tiptree Jr's *Up the Walls of the World*.¹⁰ These, however fine the imaginative edifices (and both are breathtaking), are postulated on *invented* terms bearing little relation to known fact and so, like fantasy, are not amenable to logical objection. They form an offshoot of the tradition, feeding the sense of wonder — an admirable thing in itself — but of little relevance to any human situation. Their sole statement, that we are not the only possible forms of life, is only repetition of a commonplace.

Y. I. Zamyatin's *We*¹¹ and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,¹² both deservedly famous, added the urgency of immediately observed political terror to Wells's extrapolative method, but offered little new in tech-

nique. Both fulfilled their intentions admirably because they gave such clear and acceptable pictures of the cultures they presented.

One effective but limited adaptation of an older method was made by Ursula Le Guin in *The Dispossessed*.¹³ Her novel required the confrontation of Anarchy and Capitalism under circumstances where both could be observed clinically. In these days of total knowledge of the Earth's surface it is no longer possible to 'discover' a hidden country practising Anarchy in the Amazon jungle or on an uncharted Pacific island, as with Jules Verne or Rider Haggard, so Le Guin solved her problem by settling her opposing cultures on sister planets orbiting a far star. (The same old solution, updated.) Her treatment of the anarchic planet — socially, philosophically, historically, ecologically and logistically — was a model of detailed visualisation rare in recent years, convincing because its most extreme aspects remained humanly true. Complaint has been lodged, even by admirers of the book, that her world of Capitalists was too nearly a portrait of modern America, a culture unlikely anywhere but on Earth. The complaint is just, but one realises why Le Guin chose to be uninventive here: she wanted her parable played out in immediately recognisable terms. As a result she wrote a diagrammatic novel rather than a realistic narrative, something to one side of the realistic tradition — in the tradition of Jonathan Swift and Samuel Butler, perhaps, with the outrageous satire replaced by a cooler observation.

The Dispossessed, wherein one minutely detailed and convincing creation is balanced against a less likely stock scene, raises basic questions of acceptance and rejection. (The paradox that the less convincing 'stock scene' is real and the more acceptable anarchic planet is author-created is one which, thankfully, need not be examined here.) The argument would be too fine-pointed for an essay of such limits as this, but one may briefly state the position that the average reader will, by and large, accept an unreality, *even while consciously noting its existence*, if he also perceives the reason for its introduction into the narrative (in *The Dispossessed*, to provide argumentative balance), if he is not also made aware of being made the subject of a pretence at realism which is not in fact there, or if the virtues of the novel are such as to absorb the unreality in the greater sum of its honesty.

For me, *The Dispossessed* succeeds on these terms; others may find the fault unacceptable. It is probably impossible, as well as aesthetically unwise, to establish a cut-off point between right and wrong, but it is reasonable to object to narratives which overtly present attitudes of intellectual creativity but which, on the most superficial examination, are seen to offer only novelties snatched from the imaginative heap without much attempt at pattern or practicability. *The Dispossessed* cannot be accused of this. The 'diagrammatic' novel has obvious limitations and cannot aspire to total realism, but in competent hands it can 'absorb the unreality in the greater sum of its honesty'.

What of works which offer superficial realism — of style, plot and dialogue — but which in fact display unrealities so blatant as to defy absorption? We shall glance at a selection of these before considering the

futures created by Frederik Pohl.

It has been claimed by professional reviewers as well as readers that such novels as Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man*¹⁴ and James Blish's *Cities in Flight*¹⁵ present persuasively envisioned and logically constructed future cultures. (Intentionally I have selected two which will be known to and acclaimed by a majority of science fiction readers and critics.) Both these novels have spectacularly sensational qualities which override rationalisation by the reader — until the last word has been read and the realisation arrives that nothing useful or persuasive has been offered, and any attempt to create a rationale for the cultural ambience to which the characters belong founders on a number of inconsistencies and omissions.

The Demolished Man, hailed in its day as a masterly projection of a telepathic society, collapses as soon as author Bester's conception of telepathy is examined; so many mutually exclusive operations and characteristics appear as to eliminate any possibility of his society's existence. To cite one example: much of the plot rests on the 'fact' that the non-telepathic members of the public (the majority) have no protection against 'mind-peeping' by the telepaths. Yet at one stage the telepathic hero is relieved to enter a hotel where the thick walls will shut out the telepathic noise of the public streets — which tells us at once that telepathy must be a radiation effect against which the public would long ago have developed simple baffles. It is possible to cite half a dozen more instances from the same novel, any one of them sufficient to destroy its credibility by revealing the lack of validity of its premises. Even imagination must operate from a firm base or become mere verbiage.

The citizen's of Blish's space-travelling *Cities in Flight* behave, after several centuries of traumatic experience, little differently from the way they might have done in the streets of Earth, nor does virtual immortality seem to have had any impact on their psychology or philosophy; no variant society is created here, only a vast artefact, and even minor change is barely glanced at.

One is left with the conclusion that the action simply could not have occurred as retailed by the writers because simple human reaction to circumstances has been ignored. In the Blish novel there is the compensatory working out of the Spenglerian view of history on a galactic scale, but basic reality is absent, while of the Bester novel little remains but frenzied activity.

What rankles in the critical mind is that these omissions could so easily have been corrected by the writers, yet were not, and could so easily have been detected by readers, but seem not to have been. But it is not the failings, as such, of writers and readers that are under examination but the validity of what is written and read.

To observe the failure of validity in detail, it will pay to look at some of the works of one man whose name is closely linked with the creation of fictional future societies, Frederik Pohl. He cannot, of course, be blamed for all the shortfall of the genre's claims to looking forward to times to come (other writers will be noted as occasion warrants), but his works display some dismaying examples of science fiction offering a superficial validity which vanishes on inspection.

His prominence in the genre demands that his work be considered rather than that of less acclaimed

authors. His qualifications are imposing; the following excerpts are quoted from Reginald Bretnor's anthology of science fiction essays, *Science Fiction: Today and Tomorrow*.

. . . three-time Hugo winner, editor of some thirty science fiction anthologies and author and/or co-author of more than forty books . . . science fiction consultant at Bantam Books . . . From 1960 through 1969 he was an editor at Galaxy Publishing Corp., publishers of *Galaxy* and *If*. . . He is the author, with C. M. Kornbluth, of *The Space Merchants* (1953) which has been translated into more than thirty languages . . . For three years in a row (1966–68) Mr Pohl was honoured with the Hugo Award¹⁶ . . . represented the United States in International Science Fiction Conferences in Europe and South America . . .

Here is a man who should be counted on to display in his works the difference between science fiction and shoddy. What is actually received is disturbing in the extreme.

4. *Gateway*¹⁷

This is, at the time of writing, Frederik Pohl's most recent novel. Criticism within the genre ambience suggests that it is his best to date and, in terms of superficial action and passion it possibly is, but the reader demanding more than the superficial is left with solutionless problems. His understanding of the activities of the characters in this novel depends on his understanding of the culture which fashioned them, so that the believability of their actions depends precisely on how well the culture is portrayed.

A brief synopsis is necessary for appreciation of the references which follow.

In the future (few clues to which century are given) an asteroid, *Gateway*, is found to be an interstellar transit station built long ago by the Heechee,¹⁸ a race which has vanished from the known universe. The station houses several hundred vehicles of various sizes and types which, when activated, will travel faster than light to any star correspondent to the vehicle's course settings. Exploring parties take the ships out (on arbitrary settings, destinations unknown!), sometimes earning vast rewards from discoveries at the far star, more often finding nothing of value, sometimes returning mentally or physically shattered and sometimes not returning at all. The plot, which in itself offers little peripheral information, tells of Robin Broadhead reliving his period of 'prospecting' for *Gateway* via psychiatric sessions, to the climactic point where he left his crew falling forever through the event horizon of a singularity and thereby saved his own life.

The human interest side of the account is reasonably compelling, but the core of the novel is *Gateway*, without whose peculiarities none of the action could take place; only Pohl's future culture and the nature of *Gateway* can explain the grotesque requirements of the prospecting expeditions.

Consider these characteristics of the Heechee ships and wonder what kind of people are willing to travel in them:

The power source is unknown, residing in a sealed box which explodes if inspection is attempted. In the event of power failure no repair is possible.

The nature of the fuel is unknown, so there can be no certainty that any ship is sufficiently fuelled. In the event of exhaustion fifty light years from home only the crew will ever know.

Since the function of the ships' instruments is known only empirically, after lethal trial and error, no maintenance, calibration or collimation is possible, nor is it known whether a given ship is spaceworthy or not. It returns or it doesn't.

Since distances and destinations are unknown, adequate catering is impossible. Ships sometimes return on their automatic settings with the crew dead of starvation — or only some of them dead, of cannibalism.

Some ships are armoured, presumably to permit close approach to a star, and some are not. If an unarmoured vehicle discovers that its destination is within the photosphere of a star, automatic systems return it to Gateway with a cargo of roasted prospector.

These things are known to the prospective crews, so what manner of people volunteer for such voyages? Condemned criminals, on a remission-on-return basis? But there are no condemned criminals in Pohl's cast of characters and none is portrayed as an abnormal person. They have their neuroses and complexes, as in any rational group, but nothing worse. So what motivates them? Consider these statistics, which Pohl records, and ask again:

About eighty per cent of flights from Gateway come up empty. *About fifteen per cent don't come back at all. So one person in twenty comes back with something [profitable].*¹⁹

The odds are better than with a lottery ticket, but a lottery doesn't ask your life as a possible forfeit for not winning. A lucky strike can win the prospector millions, but is simple greed explanation enough for whole families signing up with Gateway when the odds ensure that one or more must be killed?

If it were, what manner of monsters are the Gateway Corporation, who toss men and women to death for profit? Pohl tells us quite a lot about them:

The Gateway Corporation is autonomous, outside the law. The following is an extract from the Memorandum of Agreement between Gateway and prospector: '4. I release Gateway Authority from any and all claims by me . . . arising from any injury, accident or loss of any kind . . . 5. . . I agree that the terms shall be interpreted according to the laws . . . of Gateway . . . and that no . . . other jurisdiction shall be considered relevant.

Such provisions should be sufficient to deter a drunken moron from participation.

Gateway is owned jointly by five major powers — Russia, China, Brazil, America and Venus — and none of them can protect its nationals from adverse treatment by Gateway. There is no evidence that any of them cares.



Frederik Pohl, late 1970s (Photo: Brian M. Fraser)

How did this dereliction of political responsibility come about? Pohl does not tell, and the political workings of his future remain impenetrable.

The prospector would, of course, be well looked after by an employer so dependent on him. No? Definitely, no! If he runs short of money while waiting for a ship and can't be found gainful employment on the asteroid, it could be simply: out the airlock, without a suit!²⁰

Gateway, unable to service or repair its machinery, must surely, in the name of common sense, pay close attention to the efficiency of its human control elements, the prospectors. Not a bit of it! Not only are the instructors untrained in instructional method or the rudimentary ordering of information (a sample instruction session is included in the text) but it is notable that the prospectors' education includes no psychological preparation for voyages conducted in cramped, foetid conditions under extreme fear-stress. Gateway, in fact, seems unaware of the simple economics of human conservation and wastage — or of their impact on a profit-seeking organisation. As the number of incalculably valuable ships continues to dwindle for lack of controlling intelligence, one wonders how many are lost through instructional incompetence, administrative unconcern and lack of psychological preparation. And how long will the bonanza last when fifteen per cent of flights do not return?

We can now draw some tentative conclusions about Gateway and about Earth's social conditions.

Gateway is simply wasting the most precious artefacts in the solar system for immediate cash; when the last

ship fails to return it will go out of business. The owners acquiesce in this squandering of an irreplaceable resource, which should be, above all other considerations, preserved for study, even if the study must wait until civilisation catches up with the technical levels required. It contains the key to the whole of cosmic space — and nobody cares.

So, what sort of planets (Earth and Venus) exist on this take-the-money-and-run basis?

The Venusians are Terrestrial colonists living in caves beneath the uninhabitable surface; that is all we learn about the Venusians, save that they possess space cruisers. About Earth we know so far that it produces no shortage of people willing to risk their lives for money. Pohl gives us no nonsense about ‘pioneering instincts’ or ‘the unconquerable spirit of man’; he writes only of greed and desperation. Desperation? Earth, it seems, is a planet worth getting away from. To gain hints of the nature of the Terrestrial culture we must search out a bare handful of references which shed little light.

The population of Earth is 25 billion, which allows some guessing at the date of the action. With a natural increase of about 1 per cent per annum (with no gobbledegook about population control or shrinking resources or even common sense) the figure will be reached circa 2180 AD, though at the present rate, uninterrupted, 2100 AD is a possibility.

Overcrowding is not mentioned as a concern, and extended life spans can be bought by the rich. So there is no feeding problem, postulating a tremendously efficient technology. But this is nowhere in evidence; rather the reverse. Miners still suffer lung afflictions and are killed in shaft accidents.²¹ Cities are enclosed in ‘bubbles’, seeming to indicate pollution problems, though these are not emphasised. These very bare facts are about all we learn about Earth; not only do contemporary problems remain unalleviated, let alone radically dealt with, but there is no sign of any concern with them. Technology should develop exponentially, so what has happened to keep science running on the spot? Pohl gives no indication of being aware of the problem, yet historically such inertia is unacceptable save in terms of a social or physical convulsion powerful enough to redirect the psychological drive of the race.

Sociological usages may even have taken a step backwards in Pohl’s culture. Workers’ Compensation, for instance, no longer exists.²² It is one of the few hard facts given the reader, emphasising the background of profit seeking without in any way making sense of the results.

All this adds up to conditions not unbearably worse than those of the present-day Western world and possibly better than those endured by our poorer nations. Pohl tells us the Earth is unbearable because only on such a premise can *Gateway* exist in such dreadful form, but he never justifies what is surely the key fact of the novel and, with careless treatment, goes a long way towards nullifying it.

So, throughout the novel, it is difficult to accept the motivation of the prospectors, just as it is difficult to resist the conclusion that Pohl created random brutalities to lull the reader, by misdirection and emotional overkill, into accepting an illogical situation which is not

in fact demonstrated in the book.

Any attempt to rationalise the workings of the Gateway Authority reveals the Corporation as an organisation of monsters, the products of a seriously deteriorated but unexplained psychotic culture, unable to practise simple business efficiency. It is a misfortune inseparable from such loaded writing that many a reader, bludgeoned by the emotional violence of the presentation, will too easily accept it as ‘social realism’.

In upshot, the premises upon which *Gateway* is developed are unexplained and logically inexplicable. Suspension of disbelief is not achieved and no intellectual reward is offered, no view of a probable or even reasonably possible future, no statement about man now or then. *Gateway*, for all its panorama of savagery and far stars, comes close to being meaningless.

5. *The Age of the Pussyfoot*²³

Where in *Gateway* background was subordinated to plot and had to be winkled out a hint at a time, in *The Age of the Pussyfoot* the background is the story, which deals with the misadventures of a twentieth-century man who, via anabiotic freezing, is precipitated into the twenty-sixth and makes an embarrassing fool of himself through misunderstanding of cultural *mores*. Eventually he very nearly destroys the civilisation with his bumbling.

The idea of illustrating the nature of change in this fashion is excellent. Consider the translation of a country-bred Australian of 1900 AD to a Melbourne peak-hour traffic flow of 1980, with no information but what his wits can discover; the result might be catatonic. Pohl deals with a lapse of five and a half centuries.

The situation can be played for laughs as well as philosophy, and Pohl settles for laughs. This is legitimate, but the author’s invention is too shallow; the book begins almost at once to flounder in reader disbelief. Pohl’s twenty-sixth century is only the twentieth with gimmicks, a weakness he admits in an embarrassing Author’s Note at the end of the book, granting that his hardware prophecies might come to pass in as little as fifty years. Question: why didn’t he simply redate the action to 2025 AD or some suitable year?

Too much trouble for a mass readership which will swallow the second-rate and never complain?

Alas, no, the trouble lies deeper. There is a Foreword as well as an Author’s Note, and it says:

I would like to hope that some people will read this book who normally don’t read science fiction . . . It seems to me that science fiction *can* have relevance to the real world and, yes, to your own life. And some of my reasons for thinking so are set forth here . . .

These are serious words. We are intended to observe this novel on an intellectual level.

(And yet, and yet . . . one is intrigued by Pohl’s conviction that ‘science fiction *can* have relevance to the real world . . .’ If it hasn’t, why does it exist? What, in fact, does Pohl think he is doing if he writes — or, as Editor, accepts — a story without relevance?)

Acceptance becomes difficult as soon as we realise that the hero, Charles Forrester, is a caricatured twentieth-century moron. Confronted with the simplest situation, he fluffs it not through unfamiliarity but

through sheer stupidity. On resuscitation from the freezing chamber he is given a booklet designed to help him ease gently into the new culture, but he doesn't bother to read it — he is busy getting drunk. Warned that messages, some of them vitally urgent, are piling up for him, he refuses to listen to them; he is always involved in doing something pigheaded, transiently pleasant, utterly self-centred or merely stupid.

Alienation of the reader by offering an idiot as protagonist is a poor beginning, but one hopes other factors will make up for the lack. Since the twenty-sixth-century culture is itself the *raison d'être* of the novel, Pohl's presentation of this at least should command attention.

The new culture centres on a gadget, the 'joymaker'. It is a combined telephone, radio, encyclopedia, translator and provider of almost every useful service. It is operated from a central computer and every citizen has one. The invention of such an instrument for general use seems reasonable, even inevitable — and it will revolutionise the world.

However, the daily behaviour of the inhabitants of the city of Shoggo (Chicago? — in terms of language drift, unlikely, but no other offers itself) is much like that of the people of twentieth-century Melbourne or New York or London; the marvel gadget has achieved little beyond trivialising life to the point of inertia. It simply makes everything easy; the cultural impact of such an item passes the author completely by. (Think of ourselves before radio and after TV! And the joy-maker is a *fundamental* unit, affecting practically every activity in life.)

A feature of the culture is the continual resuscitation of people from all centuries after the twentieth, people maintained in cryo-suspension until medical science can deal with whatever killed them; oldtimers are a commonplace on the streets of Shoggo. Yet nobody in the story displays the slightest historical knowledge or awareness of the difference of cultures in their past; they treat the resuscitees as idiots, even when they know that unfamiliarity is the cause of whatever problem engages them. If the hero is moronic, so are the people with whom he has to deal.

One happy outcome of restorative techniques being readily available is the cheapening of life, and this has allowed the introduction of a 'sport', hunting, whereby anyone can declare a hunt on anybody else in revenge for a real or imagined slight. The victim can be hunted and killed in the public street — then restored to life via a couple of weeks in a revival centre.

The catastrophic social consequences of such savage stupidity do not concern the writer. (For example, one could declare a hunt on a business or political opponent at a moment of crisis and have him safely dead for ten or fifteen days while one's own plans ripened; or the killing and re-killing of embarrassing witnesses or experts by a series of interested hunters could reduce momentous issues to farce or tragedy.) Nor does he glance at the problems of pain and sadism. The hunt is a crucial device of the story, yet nowhere are its implications considered.

Finally, the hero finds employment (and it is legally recognised employment!) in the pay of a Sirian alien who is a prisoner of war and who has hypnotic powers

with which he makes Forrester a puppet in an escape whose consequences send the entire population racing for the cryo-chambers to sleep out the expected attack. A culture whose idiocy could permit such a state of affairs to become possible is not only beyond credence but would be unlikely to come into existence.

(Admittedly, interludes of cultural psychosis are historically familiar, but for lack of information to the contrary — and in view of the statements in the Author's Note — we must assume that Pohl is showing us a normal progression of events.)

What we have, then, is a novel which depends on its exposition of a future culture extrapolated from the baser trends of our own century. It fails at every point. Pohl has actually 'extrapolated' little, made a few not-very-venturesome guesses at possible developments, and stirred them into a saleable brew without consideration of the real consequences of his postulates. *The Age of the Pussyfoot* could be dismissed as pulp-market junk if it were not for the prestige of its author and the pretentiousness of the Foreword and the Author's Note.

(It must be noted that the theme is one which would probably have attracted the writing team when Pohl collaborated with Cyril Kornbluth in *The Space Merchants*²⁴ and other scaring satires of great competence. It may be that Pohl without Kornbluth has not the mastery of thematic point and convincing detail which marked the collaboration.)

6. Some short stories and 'The Midas Plague'²⁵

I have written elsewhere, so often that the statement must be losing force, that science fiction brags too loudly about its projective virtues but produces little to justify the noise. A novel like *The Age of the Pussyfoot*, written by one of the most respected practitioners of the genre, adds weight to my complaint, the more so in that it does not represent an odd and forgivable lapse.

Pohl's short stories and novellas often deal with futures featuring present trends so violently extrapolated that, having appreciated the point the story seeks to make, one wonders whether it has been *properly* made; that is, if the cultural setting has been *validly* imagined. If it has not, the point made on a false premise cannot be trusted; even satire must have logical parameters if it is to be taken seriously. Without logical or factual parameters science fiction is reduced to imagination without meaning, and Pohl's '*can* be relevant' makes plain his awareness that too often, in his own work as well as that of others, it is not. When one thinks over the cultural and technological premises of such stories as 'The Snowman',²⁵ 'The Day the Icicle Works Closed',²⁵ or 'The Midas Plague', smoothly tailored narratives take on the aspect of vaudeville turns — talent applied to triviality.

In 'The Snowman', the Earth's energy is supplied by heat pumps which suck heat from the total ambience, until the planet's average temperature is only a few degrees above absolute zero. Why this disastrous method? Why not solar power from space platforms? Or fusion power? Does any reader believe the planet will commit suicide rather than reorganise its technology? Or that its inhabitants will race to a lemming death while other avenues exist?

'The Day the Icicle Works Closed' postulates an

entire planet dependent for existence on a single export item, an all-purpose antibiotic. The production plant closes down when a synthetic substitute is discovered off planet and the *entire* workforce of Altair Nine becomes unemployed. There are no jobs at all? One wonders how the people managed without *any* local manufactures. Since \$10,000 is cited as the price of travel to the nearest star, large-scale imports must be financially out of the question, and Altair Nine could scarcely exist at all unless it were self-sufficient. The total unemployment is not impossible, but the circumstances postulated as causing it are — and so is the basis of the story. Pohl, like many another, invented a useful situation for his typewriter without thought of logical consequences. The story itself is trivial but — and here's the rub — with proper thought about its background it need not have been.

I am not alone in my low estimate of Pohl's competence as a purveyor of convincing futures. For consideration of 'The Midas Plague' I will call on the observations of a reviewer whose acid pen gave rise, almost alone, to intelligent critical interest in science fiction — Damon Knight.

First, the tale itself is of special interest, not only for its lack of a believable provenance for its content, but for the light its publishing history throws on the readers and, more especially, the writers of science fiction.

The story purports to extrapolate from the problems caused by industrial over-production, but nowhere is there any indication that the condition could be curbed by social or economic means or might be tamed by sheer exhaustion of resources. Instead, the idea of an apparently irreversible over-production is played for comedy, with the social answer lying in monstrous over-consumption by a public dedicated to over-using, over-demanding and over-eating — for which they gain credits for keeping the wheels of industry turning.

The tale was long ago noticed by the redoubtable Knight in his volume of essays, *In Search of Wonder*,²⁶ and his remarks can scarcely be bettered for pinpointing the nonsense involved:

This is good for one laugh, or possibly two, but there is something gaggingly irrational after a while in the spectacle of Pohl's hero choking down more food than he can eat. The question 'Why doesn't he flush the stuff down the drain?' comes up several times during the story, but Pohl never answers it, he only makes vaguely relevant-sounding noises and changes the subject. The alternate solution, that of putting robots to work using up all the stuff the hero is supposed to consume, comes thirty pages too late in the story, and is hailed by everybody as a revolutionary idea.

I recall reading the story on its initial appearance, in *Galaxy* magazine in the 1950s, and dismissing it as an amusing nonsense to be smiled over and forgotten. How wrong I was, as will be seen.

But first, a further quotation from the Knight notice, contributing to what I have already written and will later elaborate:

This is something new in idiot plots — it's second-

order idiot plotting, in which not merely the principals, but everybody in the whole *society* has to be a grade-A idiot, or the story couldn't happen . . . it also populates the future exclusively with lackwits.

The final remark returns us to my reading of the people of the future in *The Age of the Pussyfoot*, written some fifteen years later. Pohl, it seems, had learned nothing in the meantime. His satire is pointless unless he can explain how the situation came about, which he does not, in either work.

It was once my habit to excuse such careless conceptions on the ground that science fiction writers of the forties and fifties had little outlet aside from the magazines and were forced to provide what editors and readers demanded. This excuse is no longer available, if in literary honesty it ever was. The market flourishes, magazines no longer dominate the field, publishers are hungry for quality science fiction, experimental novels and fine craftsmanship command a market — and the same poverty of sociological conception and historical comprehension appears with each new batch of novels.

It should not be thought that today, twenty-four years later, 'The Midas Plague' would be received with derision by a sophisticated public. It was reprinted in 1975,²⁵ in *The Best of Frederik Pohl* (contents selected by Lester Del Rey), one of those volumes wherein the author with becoming coyness takes the reader into his confidence about the book's contents. Here is Pohl on 'The Midas Plague':

. . . and it has been just about the most widely republished shorter-than-novel story I ever wrote; it turns up in economics texts and sociology courses, and I once listened to Robert Theobald lecturing on a possible economic future for twenty minutes before it gradually dawned on me that he was telling the story of 'The Midas Plague'.

One wonders did any student point out to Robert Theobald that over-production cures itself in one of two simple ways — either the manufacturer restricts production for lack of a market, or he goes broke?

At about the same time Ben Bova (who, as will be seen, cannot be blamed for this) was editing Volume Three of *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*.²⁷ Included was 'The Midas Plague'. Now, the contents of these volumes were chosen not by the Editor but by a ballot of the members of SFWA, the Science Fiction Writers of America. *They*, the professionals, the people who should recognise fairy floss when they see it, chose 'The Midas Plague' as one of the twenty best science fiction novellas of all time.

When reviewing the volume I offered the opinion that when the writers were canvassed for their votes they wrote down the names of stories which had excited them years before — without rereading them to discover whether they had stood the test of time or of clear-headed second thoughts. I can think of no other reason for the inclusion of this story save, perhaps, that the writers are as chuckleheaded as the readers, who seem still willing to swallow nonsense whole.

7. Auctorial and critical responsibility in science fiction

Carelessness in the construction of plausible societies as backgrounds for plausible activities can be observed in the novels of many eminent, or at any rate 'prominent', science fiction writers. A short selection of popular and highly regarded novels is offered for the consideration of the interested reader:

Alfred Bester produced two thrillers, *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination (Tiger! Tiger!)*,²⁸ one dealing with a telepathic and the other with a teleporting society, told with a vigour which gave a spurious air of reality to his visions. Yet these conceptions were so riddled with internal inconsistencies as to render both books mere sleight-of-expertise. The example cited earlier, from *The Demolished Man*, is one of many depending not on scientific knowledge for their detection but on simple common sense. Undoubtedly simple common sense does, and often should, fly out of the window when pure entertainment is the aim, but I speak here of books which have been too easily accepted as having significance and importance within the genre; I am looking beyond the entertainment for the significance — and finding it lacking because its literary bricks are made without logical straw. Bester's novels are fine thrillers — and that is all they are. The attempt to elevate them to significant status denies their real service.

In *Fire Time*,²⁸ balloted into the top five contenders for the 1975 Hugo, Poul Anderson introduced a dominant race of centaurs, without consideration of the evolutionary paradoxes of such a development, of the diet problems of large and active mammals on a particularly unsuitable planet or of the architectural and other problems of their homes. In another contender, in the same year, Niven and Pournelle perpetuated in *The Mote in God's Eye*²⁸ that most ubiquitous and intractable of future societies, the Galactic Empire embracing hundreds of worlds in hundreds of cubic light years, ruled by an imperial autocrat! The staggering complexity of the philosophical and psychological problems involved, to say nothing of communications, are in these futures either ignored or pushed out of the way with a gadget which solves the author's difficulties without troubling his inventiveness. It would be interesting to see someone attempt a real examination of galactic imperialism; it might clear the shelves of much nonsense.

The objection to these books and hundreds of others is the irresponsibility of those who claim to examine ideas (aided by publishers' blurbs) while in fact writing action-oriented fantasy. There is, however, a more serious form of irresponsibility.

John Brunner's recent and financially successful novels — *Stand on Zanzibar*,²⁸ *The Sheep Look Up*,²⁸ *The Jagged Orbit*²⁸ and *The Shockwave Rider*²⁸ — were offered as projections of modern trends in overpopulation, pollution, future shock, etc. Actually they were skilfully and shrilly presented collections of possible problems stretched to their imaginative limits, given an air of immediacy by the use of newspaper and other quotations and shot at the reader with relentless literary overkill. Their basic implausibility lay in the presentation of societies wherein present trends had *already* passed the point of no return without altering the apparent stability of economies or administrations or present-day conceptions of psychological and physical

health; these societies, having long passed the disintegration point, could not exist in such extreme forms. Bluntly, these novels 'cashed in' on the current popularity of doom-saying, non-fiction, parascientific best-sellers by rehashing their material in fictional overdoses with never a glance at alternative constructions or responsible assessments of the data. Such novels, read by the unperceptive or the ill-informed as honest projections of tomorrow, are more likely to encourage future shock and alienation by their dissemination of doubtfully arguable conclusions than to give their readers an even partially accurate idea of the problems and possibilities. Science fiction has often been cited as an educational tool, but its devotion to flamboyance and melodrama lays its ambiguous teachings open to misdirection as often as enlightenment.²⁹

The reader of a detective story demands tightly logical inference and accuracy of given facts. The reader of an adventure story set in a foreign country requires that the author shall have 'done his homework' in the name of authenticity. The reader of science fiction seems either totally undemanding in such matters or else unaware that far too much of his reading bears no relation to the facts of life or the universe he lives in. He demands little of the writer; while science fiction retains its stultifying popularity, intellectual effort becomes superfluous in plotting and planning and simple honesty of intention bids fair to be the board.

Here is Frederik Pohl again, in the Author's Note to *The Age of the Pussyfoot*, arguing for his novel:

I have not taken into consideration the probabilities of large-scale disaster — through nuclear warfare, or lethal pollution of the air, or a runaway population explosion sufficient to starve us all back to the Neolithic. But there's just so much you can discuss in one story, and I wasn't happening to discuss those possibilities here.

He called them 'probabilities' but didn't discuss them because there wasn't room! In truth there was no room for the story as written; discussion of the probabilities would have made it unwritable. Yet the whole thousand or so words of that Author's Note is a defence of the novel as 'prediction'. He uses the word and seems to mean it!

The appeal of such novels lies in colourful rather than logical settings, fast action and gimmicks galore; rationality is unwanted, extrapolative coherence ignored. The pity is that their authors refuse to admit it and critics refuse to say it.

Is it just that dog doesn't eat dog? Science fiction exists in a tight circle of writers, readers and specialist critics who are in great part also science fiction writers. They review each other in newspapers and magazines, even gnaw each other's bones with occasional relish, but rarely, vanishingly rarely, admit that there might be something amiss with the practice of sacred science fiction itself. Academic criticism, though occasionally relevatory, is too concerned with appreciation of 'aspects' of science fiction and literary dissection of writers of little importance in the body of world writing. It would do greater service by fastening its scholastic expertise not on literary values (separating stylistic sheep

from the goats is not yet a worthwhile exercise — the *real* writers are self-evident) but on the shortcomings of the genre. Closer inspection of logic and content, with perhaps a little help from specialists in the scientific departments, might give science fiction the shaking up its complacency sadly needs.

Thomas Disch, a writer of great intellectual honesty, has called science fiction (of which his novel, *334*,³⁰ is one of the most reputable examples) ‘a branch of children’s literature’.³¹ Such a remark from such a man should cause both reviewers and academics to pause and reconsider, but there has been no sign of such rethinking.

While writers defend their fantasies as logical extrapolation, unchallenged by critic and reader, science fiction will remain open to the charge of being ‘kiddy lit’, adored by the escapist and ignored — rightly — by the literate intellectual.

At which point one hears the writers muttering that they have to live with the market, don’t they? (No; they can dig ditches, can’t they?) Who wants intellectual honesty? It doesn’t sell books, does it?

The answer lies in the handful of honest novels noted at the beginning of this essay. They are wanted, and they sell.

The writing of them required careful thought as well as honesty of intention, and there are few today who give those. One thinks of Disch and Le Guin, of D. G. Compton and the Strugatski brothers of Russia and a small handful of others. The situation, at least as regards the logical creation of changed societies, is liable to remain static until reviewers and academic critics — and knowledgeable readers — look more closely at work too freely praised.

No reader or reviewer in his right mind will demand a faultless creation of an alien or future society, but the present disregard of consistency, evidence, logic and common sense should not go unchallenged.

It is heartening to find that such ideas about responsibility, at least of writers, are not foreign to the writers themselves. Gregory Benford, a scientist as well as a novelist, and one who strives to fulfil the Bova dictum, raised a quiet cheer from me when he wrote for the October 1977 edition of *Locus* magazine:

Our field often lacks a respect for any reality aside from ideas *about* reality . . . Its viewpoints . . . make diagrams of the world when what we need most is an eye for its graininess . . . our simple-minded revelations, wrapping up the problem so that the hero can be safely forgotten (and ultimately, the book), betray us. A plastic epiphany is worse than none.

— Michael J. Tolley and Kirpal Singh (eds), *The Stellar Gauge*, Norstrilia Press, Melbourne, 1980

Notes

- 1 Reginald Bretnor (ed.), *Science Fiction: Today and Tomorrow*, New York: Harper & Row, 1974; also Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975.
- 2 Paul Turner (trans.), *The Penguin Classic Edition*, 1965, is one of several available.

- 3 Recent editions are far between, but I had no difficulty in locating a secondhand copy.
- 4 Originally published 1888 and frequently reprinted, most recently by Lancer (USA), 1968. Secondhand copies are not difficult to find.
- 5 Reprinted: London: Sphere Books (introduction by George Hay), 1976.
- 6 The Penguin edition of 1956 is in its eighteenth reprint.
- 7 Harrap, 1930. This work is out of print and not easily available, but worth the effort of obtaining.
- 8 London: Gollancz, 1950. Often reprinted.
- 9 London: Gollancz, 1974.
- 10 London: Gollancz, 1978.
- 11 Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics.
- 12 London: Secker & Warburg, 1949.
- 13 London: Gollancz, 1974.
- 14 New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954.
- 15 Most recently, New York: Avon Books, 1970. Various paperback editions of the individual novels of the tetralogy.
- 16 Presumably as editor of *If* magazine, which took the 1966, 1967 and 1968 Awards as Best Professional Magazine. Pohl’s name is not otherwise listed.
- 17 New York: Ballantine Books, 1977. This is the edition used for all further references.
- 18 How the name of this race, which left no decipherable records, was arrived at is a minor mystery unresolved in the text.
- 19 Frederik Pohl, *Gateway*, p. 40, my italics.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13, 14.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 23 New York: Ballantine Books, 1969. Of several available editions, this was used for the present essay.
- 24 London: Gollancz, 1972.
- 25 *The Best of Frederik Pohl*, New York: Ballantine, 1975.
- 26 Chicago: Advent, 1956. Often reprinted and still available from booksellers specialising in SF.
- 27 London: Gollancz, 1974.
- 28 The novels by Bester, Anderson, Niven, Pournelle and Brunner cited in this section were all available in various English and American paperback editions at the time of writing.
- 29 See Reginald Bretnor (ed.), *Science Fiction: Today and Tomorrow*, in the essay, ‘Science Fiction, Teaching and Criticism’, by Professor Jack Williamson BA MA PhD. The number of ‘courses in science fiction’ (a phrase covering an extraordinary diversity of instruction) available in America is staggering — more than 1000 at last count. The reading lists are equally staggering and strangely unadventurous. There seems, however, no reason why science fiction, properly used by level-headed teachers with an instinct for quality and selectivity, should not be a fine tool for the sharpening of wits and ethical attitudes.
- 30 New York: Avon Books, 1974.
- 31 Peter Nicholls (ed.), *Science Fiction at Large*, London: Gollancz, 1976.

Philip K. Dick: Brilliance, slapdash and slipshod

Reviewed:

Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said

by Philip K. Dick

(Gollancz, 1974; 231 pp.)

One of the disadvantages of writing reviews in batches at lengthy intervals is that many competent but otherwise unmemorable novels fade from mind save in a general impression of 'nicely written' or 'promising new talent' or some such. Then comes review time, and with it a frantic race through a dozen minor works to rediscover plots and dimly recalled crucial passages. (Consider the number of books I have had to read twice to satisfy demanding editors — arm-twisters they are, like J-n B-g-d and B-e G-s-e — when I could have been frustrating myself over *Finnegans Wake* or learning Japanese in order to read *The Tale of Genji* in the original! Believe it if you like.)

One can't, of course, class Philip K. Dick with the 'competent but otherwise unmemorable', but he is one writer who achieves his own brand of forgettability. With a few exceptions, such as in *The Man in the High Castle*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Martian Time-Slip* (why did they junk his lovely original title, *All We Marsmen?*), his themes, plots and characters tend to merge into a haze which is less a recollection than a general impression of the Dick mode and manner. Fragmented worlds, desperate protagonists, hallucinations of every conceivable and inconceivable kind, vicious women and Chinese puzzles of plot appear so regularly as to give one the feeling of reliving, again and again, the same experience against different backdrops. Nor am I unsure that this is not a truthful depiction of the Dick struggle with reality — a constant attack on an obsessive theme, expressed with every imaginative device he can lay his literary hands on, but leading at last to the same impression of tortured defeat.

But there are Dick novels — I have mentioned three — of great clarity and individuality. A fourth is *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*.

And at once I must stop and reconsider and tell the truth. I read it some months back and thought it more immediately lucid than most Dick works, but dismissed it as a minor potboiler about the police state plus a new use of hallucination. Later it occurred to me that it was an experiment in grafting SF on to the 'LA private eye' novel (I mentioned this to Bruce, who gave the noncommittal grunt which means he doesn't think much of *that* for an idea) and there certainly is a deal of such slick writing, characterisation and plotting in it. Similarities

dictated by story line perhaps.

Then a pro-review copy arrived and I had to settle on an opinion — and could only recall the typical Dick haze of speed, single-trait characterisation and dizzying complications. Nothing for it but to re-read . . .

And a different book emerged. *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* is (believe it or not, you Dick-fanciers) a novel about love. Furthermore, it is not a very good one. But it *is* very interesting and, good or bad, worth your attention for what it has to say.

Protagonist Jason Taverner is a 'six' — a laboratory-mutated type never very penetratingly defined in the story — who has, with his special abilities, become a famous TV personality. He has a typical Dick love-hate relationship with another star, Heather Hart. Being a 'six', he stands at some psychological remove from the rest of humanity (he understands people clinically rather than emotionally) and, as a wealthy star, is also removed from 'little man' problems. His love life is patchy, temporary, gusty and gutsy — what you will — in the aimless fashion of those who, having discarded monogamy, find no satisfactory substitute in playing the field. (This may, if you like, stand for the book's first symbol of the old Dick fragmentation.)

He is hospitalised after an attack by a revengeful ex-love and wakens to find himself cured but lying in a frowsy hotel room and minus the precious identification papers without which, in the police state (date uncertain, somewhere between 1990 and 2000?) he becomes automatically a non-person, fodder for the forced labour camps. (It was this obtrusive police-state business which obscured much of the novel's point on first reading. More about this later.)

So he is a man on the run, thrust into the common world he does not understand. And nobody — literally nobody — seems to have heard of Jason Taverner and his TV show. Heather Hart does not know him, nor do his agent, lawyer, etc. (This is also a lengthy business which, although necessary to the plot, helps to cloud the central statement.)

He meets with a female ID forger, who provides him with essential documents. But she is a product of Dick's word in decay — today's world writ larger, little altered in essence — and self-centred to the point where she justifies herself both as forger and police informer by creating an imaginary 'husband in the labour camps' whom she is working to set free. She solidifies her illusions by going into public hysterics when they are questioned. She wants Taverner sexually (husband or no husband) and knows all the arguments justifying

'unfaithfulness'. She doesn't get him because her elaborate ploy of betrayal simultaneously with attempted protection (the symbol of her mental processes) undoes her and the police move in.

At this point we learn that Taverner does not exist in an administrative sense; there is no documentation of him anywhere in the world. He is given a police pass so that police surveillance may discover his supposed collaborators/manipulators.

He goes to Las Vegas and picks up an old flame, Ruth (who, of course, does not remember him). Ruth is love in decay. She has had it all, including at least twenty-one husbands, and she uses the telephone sex networks whereby simultaneous orgasms, with multiple feedback, can be experienced by hundreds at a time. She is a shell of sex, the ultimate in lust, you might think — if you didn't know from experience that Dick always trumps his own aces. For her, love and lust are the same thing. In a world without moral definition — which is what most of Dick's worlds are — she cannot tell the difference. (But she tells a little fable about a rabbit that thought it was a cat, worth searching out and thinking over.)

By this time Taverner's lack of identity has caught the interest of police chief Buckman, who has him brought back for questioning. To catch him the police must raid the building containing Ruth's apartment and search it floor by floor to find him by elimination.

On their second-last doorknock, the police lurch in on a homosexual encounter between a rather over-written old queen and a thirteen-year-old boy. The activity, it develops, is legal. Though the police exhibit disgust and high-minded attitudes, it is plain that their real desire is a victim for violence — and none is legally available. Meaning that they mightn't get away with it.

It was this incident, having no relevance at all to any of the principals of the story (it gets a chapter all to itself), which alerted me to the sexual portrait gallery. This just *had* to be part of some overriding theme because it had no connection with the plot. It must have been, in Dick's view, a necessary insertion, even jammed in crudely, as it was without reference to good workmanship or the general action. He thereby showed us another aspect of a world where even corruption of the sexually immature — in the sense of deliberate interference before the process of personal selection can take place after puberty — is legalised. Moral definition being non-existent, legal and not-legal become terms of political expediency . . . if it won't harm the dominance-system, by all means permit it; if it will, forbid it. The people? Oh, let the twits do as they please; it's their own fault if they aren't happy when they can do what they like — so long as it doesn't rock the boat. And the price of freedom? Sure, there's a price. But they wanted it, didn't they? So where's the bellyache?

This, then, is our own world, italicised in the Dick idiom. In a day when every noisy little group infests the footpaths demanding 'natural' rights, who stops to sort out rights from indulgences, or even from private desires to be gratified at the expense of others? (Is this me talking about morality? Good God! I thought I'd got past caring how other people kill themselves. Thank you, Philip Dick.)

Taverner is caught and brought before Buckman,

who questions him and lets him go again, loaded with miniature surveillance gear. Buckman has come full blown into the action halfway through the book and swiftly develops into the key character, although Taverner makes most of the plot running. Buckman, it seems, has a love-hate — mainly hate — and thoroughly incestuous relationship with his sister, Alys, a monstrous leather-and-lesbianism type who gathers *all* sex into her practice and uses *all* forms of stimulant as well. Where Ruth was helplessly lustful, Alys uses sex merely as another ancillary gratification. Her generalised lust is the kind that would eat the world and hunger for the moon.

This monster picks up Taverner as he leaves her brother, removes the surveillance gear, and takes him to her home. Her interest in him — and here the thing becomes difficult to elucidate — is that she has caused his non-identity situation through a drug which causes hallucinations not only in the user but in others concerned in the hallucination produced. It alters reality outward from a centre. The implication seems to be that the whole situation is only temporarily existent, though other views are possible. You know Dick when he starts his reality-juggling! This reality-variant is one of his least successful, impossible to rationalise; it barely gets by, if at all.

At any rate, Alys dies of an overdose of telephone-sex-network feedback (did I hear some greasy mutter about the perfect finish?) and Taverner escapes to yet one more woman, Mary Anne — who doesn't want him. She is an artist, a potter, who finds release in her art. Make what you like of her, and the whole incident wherein Taverner at last meets someone to whom he has nothing to offer. She is the only island of peace in the sexual storm. Not that she rejects sex as a fulfilment; she wants the something more that turns a sexual encounter into a loving encounter. As an artist she rejects the second rate, even fears it.

So Taverner has come full circle to the reality of love, which is not for his 'six' superiority to find. Is there further to go? There is, but not for Taverner.

Buckman discovers his sister's death, and the politically disastrous reason for it, and decides to call it murder, with Taverner as patsy. Here follows one of the most uncomfortable sequences in any of Dick's writings — a long internal discussion of Buckman, emotionally torn by the death of his sister/lover, shuddering down through levels of mental stress to a realisation of some basic truths about the nature of the world he inhabits. In the end he makes an extraordinary but clumsily appealing gesture to a negro which is, miraculously, not misunderstood. He has understood something of the necessity for love itself in the sense of a oneness of humanity, without the pleasure/pain complications of sex — love as a basic person-to-person gesture.

I hate to say it of so important a sequence, but this is Dick at his worst, coping with a page-after-page analysis which apparently he would not trust himself to achieve by his usual method of a single stroke of action. (I don't blame him; this sort of thing is frustratingly difficult.) The main trouble, I feel, is that we are not prepared for such a reaction in Buckman; nothing in the previous scenes demonstrates potential for such a gesture or even for the soul-searching which provokes it.

An epilogue tells, with full Dick quirkishness, what

became of all the major characters, and the final paragraph, dealing not with a person but with an artifact, is worth quoting:

The blue vase made by Mary Anne . . . wound up in a private collection of modern pottery. It remains there to this day, and is much treasured. And, in fact, by a number of people who know ceramics, openly and genuinely cherished. And loved.

And so often with Dick, you must make what you can of that. When you have sorted out all the involvements — of which my account has hinted at only a fraction — this, one of Dick's simpler novels, still retains some ambiguities.

Earlier, I remarked that this is not a good novel. It is time to say why.

It is a good *story* — entertaining, hard-hitting, swift, inventive. It is not a good novel because the story, emphasising mystery and suspense, diverts attention from the displays of emotional fragmentation which are the real heart of it. If these are not the *raison d'être* of the novel, then what is the significance of the curiously isolated homosexual scene, and what meaning has Buckman's anguished approach in sexless love to the negro who plays no other role in the action?

So many people find Dick a fine and significant writer that I incline to listen to them and not say too much, wondering if I have missed what others have found, looking for some blind spot in my appreciation, hoping for enlightenment. But the praises always end in vagueness when I try to pin them down to cases, and like Omar I come 'out by that same door which in I went'.

Recently the Nova Mob debated Dick, with the reluctance to see much fault in his work which is the attitude of Dick fans in general. He was praised for (1) the high standard of his writing, (2) realism of background, and (3) characterisation. He was no doubt praised for other things, but these I remember from having heard them so often.

Are these praises justified?

High standard of writing?

I quote from page 5 of *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*: 'Jason Taverner has never and will never disappoint his fans.' And from page 10: 'Things which even he, at forty-two years, didn't know them all.' (Believe it or not, that is a complete and self-contained sentence.) These represent careless, sloppy writing, and the book presents many more examples.

Reverting to page 5, we find this: 'Heather . . . cursed quietly as her flat, large hat flopped from her head and disappeared forever within the whale's belly of close-pressing fans.' The metaphor, if you visualise the scene, seems irrelevant. It is visually inept and raises associations (Jonah) which do not belong to the reference. It is the metaphor of a fast writer who doesn't revise much. Again, on page 99, we have this: '. . . her mouth twisting like newborn things just alive'. It is not only tautological but visually vague — what newborn thing resembles a twisting mouth? It is a reaching for the big effect without reference to meaning or common sense.

On page 165: '. . . then, for reasons obscure to him

but somehow important, he snatched up the two records from the phonograph . . .'

This is sheer laziness. Those records had to be got out of the room in order to make the plot work, but there simply was no reason why the man should take them. My plotter's teeth go on edge when I strike that word 'somehow' (somehow our hero found the strength — somehow he knew there was an enemy round the corner — somehow he hung on long past all human endurance — somehow he . . . balls!) *No* novelist is entitled to snow the reader. It is plain bad craftsmanship. It wouldn't have been all that difficult, given the illimitable freedoms of SF activity, to think up a cogent reason.

Sorry, but Dick is, in detail, a very bad writer indeed.

Yet, irritatingly, he is also capable of brilliant workmanship, and Bruce has quoted enough in his writings on Dick to prove the point. But he is, between splashes of brilliance, slapdash and slipshod and — I think — capable of manipulating plot to make his thesis work (which is culpable indeed) and equally capable of ignoring incompatibilities when they get in his way. (I think here of the hopeless temporal mess concerning cause and effect in *Counter Clock World* and the problems of influence between living and half-living in *Ubik* — the latter despite Lem's gallant attempt to defend the indefensible by introducing ideas which the writer did not hint at.)

What a Dick novel has to say is unfailingly interesting but the details of his saying are as unfailingly suspect. (I am not one who feels that anything goes in SF; for my money, a novel must make *logical* sense, *particularly* when it is questioning accepted logic. I don't mind a writer hinting at universes where the *status quo* is different, but when he starts describing *how* different, then he had better have a mightily logic-proofed structure to offer. Otherwise he is merely playing fantasy on no higher level than the ass who thinks he is writing SF if he bases a story on the question, 'What if we all turned green with pink stripes?')

I have never agreed with those who find his backgrounds convincing. There are good ones — *The Man in the High Castle* — but in general they seem to me almost non-existent. This may be reasonable in a writer who questions reality at every step, and it is no doubt simpler to have his characters exist in closed universes, where they are more easily controlled. Often all that exists in the four walls of the immediate scene are a patch of blue sky or other simple prop when it becomes necessary to shift the locale. Tell me something coherent about the worlds — the everyday, *living* worlds, I mean — of any of his novels except *The Man in the High Castle* and perhaps *Solar Lottery*. You won't be able to tell much because these worlds were never shown save through cracks in the action. They weren't relevant to the action, so they didn't exist except as odd traits to be introduced as required. The test of a good background is: what can you tell me about the lives of the average citizens who are *not* in the story?

The Nova Mob made some talk of characterisation. People praising Dick always do. But just try to pin them down! (The Nova Mob came up with the Japanese gentleman in *The Man in the High Castle*. Good try.)

Let's look at the characters in *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*.

Taverner — handsome, intelligent, talented. And, like most Dick people, panic-stricken if the plot demands it and perfectly calm in similar circumstances a few chapters later — because the plot demands it. Taverner is a puppet. But then, his is a puppet's role — he is there to make the string of sex contacts which are the book. Ok, I'll accept Taverner — as a non-character.

There are the women — five major ones. Heather Hart hates people, loves Taverner — and what else? Ruth Rae is an emotionally burned-out sexpot; not much room for character work there, just dreariness in expensive gowns. Mary Anne is an artist, a nice girl whose image comes over well enough, but she is so plainly puppeted into position to make a point that it really doesn't matter when she is smartly phased out, her bit part done.

Alys is a monster; she isn't a character at all. She personifies love perverted (in the Dantean sense) and finally life perverted because love has no place in it. Nobody could make a character from such material. She is a construct, a gimmick. (A damned interesting one, though.)

This leaves the hysterical Kathy, the forger. She could be a character if she lasted long enough. She is a thing of contradictions which it would be possible to resolve, because she is the only person in the book with enough psychological background to build a human being on. Then, when we have become interested in her as a person, the plot demands she be discarded and forgotten. Damn! There's a whole book in that girl, and a whole crazy civilisation shoring her up, and we will never know about them. (But Dick is not interested in people save as demonstration models, or in backgrounds save as gimmick hooks.)

The only other person of importance is Buckman, the police chief, a fairly conventional literary-model cop of brains and menace. Incest gives him a quirk but doesn't make him a person, and the style of his big scene with the negro could have been grafted on to any human being in distress. Buckman is a puppet.

Tell me — honestly, now — how many Dick characters can you readily conjure up by name, appearance, provenance and personality? Those are minimum requirements for memorable characterisation.

That's enough tearing down; it's time to build up. One of the things a reviewer must do when he has finished gutting a novel or a writer is find honesty enough to acknowledge the good amidst the bad. This is most true when dealing with a man like Dick, who commands general praise. The totally worthless rarely receive universal plaudits. If a majority sees value, as distinct from merely emotional pleasure, it is the reviewer's business to discover what they see and to evaluate it.

The first and most obvious plus value in Dick is his talent as a story-teller. He has ingenuity, speed and much of that unrelenting drive which took us all by the short hairs in Bester's first two novels. This knocks realism on the head, save in tiny moments which impinge like darts and stick in memory, creating an illu-

sion of realism in retrospect. But of general realism there is little or none; the nature of the Dick plot, allowing never a static moment, prevents it.

Is this, then, a weakness? In a purely literary sense, yes. But if we drop the classically literary for the nonce and examine non-realism as a suitable technique for exhibiting a point of view, we can only approve. Dick has not bypassed the rules for lack of talent but because he could make use of the obverse — non- or anti-realism — of one particular rule. The nature of reality has been his overriding concern through a score or more of books and he has used a non-realist technique to impose it on his fictions — plus the occasional flick of realistic observation to tie it, however loosely, to the world we know.

The same, I think, applies to his characterisations. His characters vanish into haze when the book is done. And why should they not? The puppeteer has done with them. They were not people but types, mostly very extreme types (which gives the illusion of characterisation by the impact of strangeness, but is in fact only a process of issuing identification tags) representing the range of people to be considered as a cross-section. He has been spoken of as a creator of microcosms and there is a sense in which this is true; his mode of using a matrix of contrasting types usually produces a spectrum of reaction and behaviour which can stand as fairly representative of humanity. So, if there are rarely any real characters, there is always a group symbol of humanity.

Lack of background also has its value. If his puppets move in a vacuum, at least we are not distracted by irrelevancies. Dick unfolds a formula for a particular aspect of reality or unreality, the aspect he wishes to discuss.

My summing up perhaps amounts to this: if we are prepared to approve the totally contrived, non-realist novel (and in Dick's case it is pretty obvious that most of us are), then let us give due praise to the man who writes it better than anyone else. But — and this is an ever-present but — let us not go overboard with praise beyond the bounds of good sense. Science fiction has always suffered too much from that, and made itself laughable where it might have been respected.

For myself, I wish that Dick would write about one-third as much three times as well, get rid of the careless and the hasty, and pay attention to patching obvious logical holes.

The answer to that, I suppose, is that writers must live and to live must produce. My personal recipe — to work for a living and write in one's spare time — seems to appeal to nobody but myself. But it would certainly reduce the enormous output of indigestible, infuriating professional science fiction which its writers should be ashamed of. And possibly would be if it wasn't a question of baby's new shoes.

For all except the totally successful, being a professional writer is a hell of a life, which I would only wish cheerfully on people who are cruel to animals.

— Bruce Gillespie (ed.), *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*, Norstrilia Press, 1975

GEORGE DISAGREES WITH ROBERT SILVERBERG AND GARDNER DOZOIS

Letters to the Editor

Reviewed:

New Dimensions I

edited by Robert Silverberg

(Doubleday; 1971; 246 pp.)

Whatever I may occasionally say and think about Robert Silverberg's novels and stories — and my thoughts vary from highly appreciative to potentially libellous, as is inevitable with so productive an author — I have always been a staunch supporter of his work as an anthologist. Some such introduction seems required, for there is mayhem to follow, and I protest that in spite of it, my respect for Silverberg-the-anthologist remains untarnished.

Letter I

Yours resentfully,

(Sgd) Indignant Reader.

Now that Silverberg has begun producing anthologies of original material, which is a matter rather different from skimming off a bookful of time-hallowed 'classics', he will have discovered that much more than selection, arrangement and comment is required of him. Some real *editorial* activity is needed.

Here I propose to poke a finger at his editorial eye. At this distance, and in view of his barrage of successes, my finger won't hurt his eye in the least, but the exercise will allow me to interpose some thoughts on fiction, the fiction writer and the fiction editor — and to ask a question or two at the end which will be more important than all the literary slaughter between here and there.

I wish to examine one story from editor Silverberg's anthology, *New Dimension I*. It is called 'A Special Kind of Morning', it runs to about 17,000 words, it is written by Gardner R. Dozois and it is placed first in the collection.

Dozois would have been about twenty-three or -four when he wrote the yarn (this is relevant) and he had then been for a few years one of those names that cropped up here and there as one whose work was not-bad-not-specially-good-but-promising.

On the strength of certain indications in 'A Special Kind of Morning', which is an extremely bad story, Dozois will one day be a very good writer indeed. My questions, to come later, will home in on the matter of why he isn't a pretty good writer as of here and now, which he should be.

His story begins with this first paragraph:

Did y'ever hear the one about the old man and the

sea? Halt a minute, lordling; stop and listen. It's a fine story, full of balance and point and social pith; short and direct. It's not mine. Mine are long and rambling and parenthetical and they corrode the moral fibre right out of a man. Come to think, I won't tell you that one after all. A man of my age has a right to prefer his own material, and let the critics be damned. I've a prejudice now for webs of my own weaving.

Such rambling is all right if it can be seen that it will lead somewhere. This, alas, leads nowhere, but extends itself for about 1600 words before it slides, almost unnoticeably, into the story. It isn't altogether uninteresting *per se*, but does nothing to establish the nature of what is to follow or to plant points for development. It *does* establish that the narrator is an 'old soak' (*sic*) who has cornered some socialite youngster into listening while he drools on. 'Fix'd him with his glittering eye'? Not a bit of it. Even this possible reference to the Ancient Mariner is a red herring, possibly unintentional.

The monologue also tells us a little about Dozois — certainly unintentionally. For instance, let's listen to the 'old soak' talk:

The world's your friend this morning, a toy for you to play with and examine and stuff in your mouth to taste, and you're letting your benevolence slop over onto the old degenerate you've met on the street. You're even happy enough to listen, though you're being quizzical about it, and you're sitting over there feeling benignly superior. And I'm sitting over *here* feeling benignly superior. A nice arrangement and everyone content.

Old soaks, old degenerates, don't talk like that — because they can't. The story of the stinking old alky who speaks and behaves like a cultured gentleman is a purely literary invention. He doesn't exist. As an ex-alcoholic who has come out the other side to talk about it, as one who has jostled skid row on its own terms, I say that Dozois is a young man who still believes what he reads in other men's fictions and so perpetuates the myriad legends of which fiction is guilty. (You wouldn't want to know what the alky cultured or intellectual type is really like, unless you're a ghoul.)

And the old soak says:

Life's strange — wet-eared as you are, you've probably had that thought a dozen times already . . . well, I've four times your age, and a ream more experi-

ence, and I still can't think of anything better to sum up the world: life's strange.

Drivelling old nit! Only young men and elderly morons think life is strange. For the old, strangeness has long ago worn off; even at fifty-seven, which is not desperately old, I find life absorbing and occasionally unexpected, but no longer strange. With the accumulation of experience (which has nothing to do with wisdom) you achieve not so much an immunity to strangeness as a realisation that it is all perfectly explicable in terms of common knowledge; even the occasional fixations and ecstasies and apparent paradoxes and coincidences are part of the pattern. Only to the young man still seeking a pattern (or the old man too dim to create one) is 'strangeness' confounding to the point of trying to make a philosophic mystery of it. As he grows older he absorbs it without effort into his world vision; a UFO in the front garden might frighten or excite him, but it wouldn't disturb his sense of rightness — life and vicarious life have readied him for the unexpected.

So Dozois has been playing a young man's pretence at being an old man. The moral is, of course, that the writer should have some sort of relevant experience or source of information before he writes away from his own parameters. This is why young men generally write badly about old men, men write badly about women and vice versa.

The old soak says also:

'... it reeks of it, as of blood. And I've smelt blood, buck. It has a very distinct odour; you know it when you smell it.

Dozois hasn't smelt much blood, or he would know that except in most unusual concentrations the smell isn't very noticeable; in the open it is scarcely noticeable at all; indoors it is liable to masking by any other moderate smell. Only when it begins to decay does the smell of blood become overpowering — overpoweringly rotten. I know. I've been there — in a war, in an abattoir, in hospitals. The 'reeking altars' of Greek epic poetry reeked mostly of animal sweat and the spilling contents of the victims' guts.

Writers have social and historical value in their role as recorders of life-as-it-is. Unfortunately they record too much as it isn't, and younger writers (who can't be expected to experience everything in their first thirty years) take their hand-me-downs for granted and perpetuate the line of error down the generations. One can't hold it against Dozois that he didn't know, but with an alert editor to exercise watch and ward...

Without such editing, his first 1600 words become not only unnecessary but largely nonsense.

At last the story starts, and at once we are faced with a different kind of nonsense. Such as this:

And D'kotta-on-the-Blackfriars was indescribable, a seventy-mile swathe of smoking insanity, capped by boiling umbrellas of smoke... At night it pulsed with molten scum, ugly as a lanced blister, lighting up the cloud cover across the entire horizon...

When a writer, from Dickens and Tolstoy downwards, uses words like 'indescribable' (shades of Lovecraft!) in a descriptive passage — or 'ineffable' or 'unimaginable' — get your defences ready, for you are about to be conned.

Here Dozois has reached for powerful phrases to put across a vision he has not in fact formed properly in his own mind. (If he had, he would have done it differently.) What does 'smoking insanity' look like? And what is the connection between the appearance of *molten* scum and the dull rubbish exuded from a lanced blister?

There's another 'description' of the scene:

So we watched it all from beginning to end; two hours that became a single second lasting for eons. Like a still photograph of time twisted into a scream — the scream reverberating for ever and yet taking no duration at all to experience.

You can see it now? You can? Good for you, you liar.

It's all a young writer's excess of metaphor in reaching for the Big Effect. He will learn that simple language, skilfully handled, hits twice as hard. He will learn it faster if some kindly editor beats him over the head with the fact.

Well, a story is in some sort of motion. We have learned that a war is going on somewhere in the universe (where, is not really important). The ruling Combine is being fought by the rebel Quaestors, of whom the old soak, now a young man, is one. The Quaestors have just won a major battle. And so —

And so we get a 2500 — yes, 2500 — word flashback describing the course of the battle to that point. Followed by another 2500 words flashing further back to outline the course of the war before the battle. So, after some 6500 words, one point has been established — that the Quaestors have won a battle. What happens in the remaining 10,000 can be told quickly:

The Combine specialises in biological constructs, and so rules a world of clones, sentients, insentients, nulls and zombies. (The hero is a zombie — a sort of super-regimented slave — who has escaped and become humanised.) After the battle, the hero's squad is sent to intercept Combine reinforcements by shooting down the robot spaceship bringing them. In the process they are discovered by a null — a computer-directed biological construct possessing only such limbs, organs and senses as it needs to do its work, plus some perceptions and no intelligence. The hero is ordered to kill it and fails (emotional rebellion) just as the robot ship arrives and fresh violence begins. He is injured and his life is saved by the null (unintentionally, because it has no thought processes), which is in turn routinely killed by a medic who, in the fashion of the day, does not consider the thing human. This experience turns the boy into a different man, one with empathy for all things living. And eventually, apparently, into a degenerate old soak.

Well, plots don't matter much, so long as they support the theme. Dozois' plot is acceptable and his theme is the dependable old all-men-are-brothers. (I notice that this always points out that the underprivileged are acceptable as brothers in spite of their environment-engendered frailty, degradation and bestiality, but the

overprivileged are not acceptable in spite of their environment-engendered frailty, degradation and bestiality. It is therefore necessary for the Quaestors to destroy the Combine. Anybody for empathy?)

But Dozois' handling is clumsy and defaced by faults which should not have appeared. Aside from two more flashbacks totalling about 1600 words, we get observational errors which grate. One example:

. . . started to take a piss . . . At the sound of the first shot the executive had whirled — penis still dangling from pantaloons, piss spraying wildly — and dodged for the back of the van . . .

One of the effects of shock-alert is to freeze such physical processes as will interfere with fight or flight. There could be no piss spraying wildly.

Later they are positioning lasers to destroy the robot relief ship, and we read:

The hardest thing was figuring out elevation and trajectory, but we finally got them all zeroed on a spot about a hundred feet above the center of the valley floor.

'Trajectory'? With a laser? What does he think a laser does? Describe a howitzer arc? What they are setting up is known in military language as a fixed-line fire plan, and Dozois, who according to the introduction has been a military journalist, should have known it. And known, too, that there are simple rule-of-thumb methods of achieving such zeros, even in mid-air.

A few paragraphs later:

Heynith was in the middle, straddling the operator's saddle of the laser.

Saddle? What for? Even a powerful laser is not a ten-ton field piece. According to Dozois, these lasers were not manoeuvrable, but had to be positioned by sweat and shoving; but all the really heavy equipment needed would be a power source (battery, accumulator or what-have-you) complete with button for pressing. Why, particularly with a fixed line the commander (of all people!) should straddle a saddle like an operator at a complex manual control system is incomprehensible. Either Dozois has not visualised what he is writing about or he simply hasn't bothered to do even five minutes' research on the subject of lasers and feels that the bug-eyed readers wouldn't know anyway.

But the editor should have noticed — and slapped him down hard.

And some more *science* fiction:

. . . I slipped the infrared lenses down over my eyes, activated them. The world came back in shades of grey.

Infrared lenses can only operate by detecting heat radiated from a body and stepping it up into the light spectrum. Seen any grey light lately?

And still more science *fiction*, showing how well Dozois has researched his material and how little it has

been edited:

Heynith had been the only survivor. The Combine had expressed mild sympathy, and told him that they planned to cut another clone from him to replace the destroyed Six; he, of course, would be placed in charge of the new Six, by reason of his seniority.

The implication is that the Combine was willing to hold up its affairs for a generation or so while a new clone grew up. Or could it be that a writer fondly imagined that a clone is produced at maturity in a sort of high-velocity bottle without an intervening growth process? Cloned material takes just as long to grow as the original, does not possess all the original's knowledge and experience, starts as a baby and has to grow up and be educated like anyone else. You don't just chip a bit off and 'Hey presto!' a set of quins!

I hate to report that in the interests of space and out of concern for your patience, I have omitted mention of a dozen or so other passages I marked for comment.

Now for the questions:

- 1 Should a young and promising writer be given the encouragement of publication simply because he has produced a story which will 'get by' with an indiscriminating public?
- 2 Should an editor who is prepared to write 'He has the essential gift of the born master of narrative' back up his statement by printing a story which demonstrates an utter lack of narrative skill?
- 3 Should he also write, 'Watching him develop is going to be an exciting experience', but do nothing to ensure that such development occurs? Printing a man's failures is one way of making him sure that rubbish is good enough.
- 4 Should an editor put himself behind a young writer of promise (in spite of all that has gone before, Dozois is certainly that), even to the point of refusing his work until he weeps with the effort of improving?
- 5 Where would SF be today if Campbell hadn't done just that?

Letter II

Yours appreciatively,

Hopelessly Biased But Approving Reviewer

After all that, how the hell am I going to sell you the idea that this book is worth your attention, particularly as there are further grouches to come?

The point is that Silverberg has produced two of the most exciting anthologies since *Adventures in Time and Space* — *Science Fiction Hall of Fame* and *The Mirror of Infinity* — and that, despite my screams of outrage, he does the anthology bit better than anyone else in the current scene.

But (why can't a reviewer be nice to anyone without beginning the next sentence with 'but?') in *New Dimensions* I he has taken on the touchier business of soliciting and presenting new stories. So he can't simply grab the best from a big heap, he can't be sure his chosen

contributors will really provide the goods, and almost certainly his final grouping will be exasperatingly just short of the ambition with which he began.

So let me say now that, warts and all, *New Dimensions I* is more worthwhile than the snide, strident, petulant, exhibitionist *Dangerous Visions*, which presented a great deal of innocuous dim-viewing under a widescreen, technicolor title.

A lot of *New Dimensions II* didn't like. So what? You may like the very items that turned me off. My business as reviewer is to display the wares and discuss them as honestly as I can; you see, I believe that a reviewer should be able occasionally to say, 'I recognise that this is a competent, properly crafted tale which leaves me emotionally cold because my attitudes do not recognise its themes and premises as being of any interest. It is, nonetheless, a competent and well-crafted tale, and I cannot honestly damn it out of hand.'

I found this a necessary gambit quite often when considering *New Dimensions I*, mainly because of the variety of tastes and interests covered.

In his Introduction, Silverberg writes: '*New Dimensions* . . . attempts to negotiate the difficult middle course between the old and the new.' And, lower down the page: 'I think they also display the vigor and freshness of the contemporary sf mode, free of the preciousness and emptiness that disfigure too much of the recent product.'

It does and they do (although the 'preciousness and emptiness' bit could swing on a matter of approach). But sheer variety — from quite heavily traditional SF to the involutions of Ellison and the inconclusions of Lafferty — makes for a compilation that cannot hope to please everyone, and for me the result is critically interesting rather than totally entertaining. As a survey of the art it has some passing value; such an anthology had sooner or later to be attempted and Silverberg is to be congratulated on even partial success in a field so lacking even in definition, but viability as a series has to be proved.

There are fourteen stories, of which the first has been discussed at length. It is followed by two time stories coupled, I imagine, to highlight the old way and the new.

'The Trouble with the Past' (the first professionally published story by Alex and Phyllis Eisenstein) is a traditional paradox comedy, ringing the changes on time duplication and its attendant absurdities. It belongs unashamedly to a sub-genre that was with us before 'By His Bootstraps' was a pup, and is always worth an appreciative grin, but it is a little raw in technique for the company it keeps here.

Josephine Saxton's 'The Power of Time' is very much in the new style — a time story that does away with time travel and substitutes a haunting sense of connection between events centuries apart. Her wholly normal and smilingly compassionate little love story of today is presented in alternating sequences with the totally fantastic activities of a long-range descendant of that affair. The connection between events is implied rather than stated, and the tale is a fine example of what the new techniques can do in the borderland between fantasy

and reality.

'The Giberel' is possibly included because its writer is the prestigious Doris Pitkin Buck, but the story has been written in variation too often before. Still, it has charm and literary quality and should not be summarily dismissed.

'Vaster than Empires and More Slow', by Ursula Le Guin (where doesn't that lady show up these days?) is expectably one of the book's superior contributions, and is another of her investigations of communication and the nature of alienness. 'He had learned the love of the Other, and thereby had been given his whole self. But this is not the vocabulary of reason.' That quotation is the core of one of the few stories which will probably please all readers.

'The Great A', by Robert C. Malstrom, is another 'first' story, and is a surrealist parable of the creative artist at work. I find the conventional savagery of the satire wearisome and the imagery coarse and overblown. 'You bastards drain my soul for pelf!' is a wornout attitude which the true artist was usually too busy to have time for, and still is. No one should write about *great* artists until he has met a couple, and they are mighty hard to come by. And when you've met one, you won't be sure you know enough to write about him.

Harlan Ellison's 'At the Mouse Carnival' is of course more surrealistic still. It contains some fascinating imagery which adds up to very little — or adds up irritatingly to any total you care to make it. It has all the elements of hallucination and none of the art which relates vision to life, and the mind-blowing writers have so far offered us no insights we had not already achieved by less questionable means. Ellison and Moorcock must battle it out some day for the title of Hollowest Reputation in SF. (So I'm a twit-witted reactionary old bastard, am I? Wait twenty years and ponder my judgment. I've seen 'em come and go and am hard to impress.)

Leonard Tushnet's 'A Plague of Cars' has a genial laugh about America's abandoned-car cemeteries and the miserliness of local administrations. Its forefather is 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' and it is a pleasant relief after the surrealists. Nothing wonderful, but good average middle-of-the-road SF.

But with 'Sky' we are in a typical R. A. Lafferty splurge. Sometimes, as in 'Continued on Next Rock', Lafferty is utterly fascinating and sometimes, as in 'Sky', he just runs out of steam, and what starts as fascination ends in boredom. It is a picture of 'consciousness-expanding chemistry', i.e. hallucination and the impression that you are really with it, whatever 'it' is. (We never do find that out, do we? Another of those incommunicable, indescribable, ineffable things — as in 'complete confusion'.) The final vision of the drug-destroyed old woman is a touch of magnificence, worth the trouble of all the wordage leading up to it.

Ed Bryant's 'Love Song of Herself' is interesting, beautifully written, original and finally disappointing. It is a delicate vision of activities bearing little relation to life; like 'Kubla Khan' it breaks off at the moment of beginning to say something. But it is lovely while it lasts.

Harry Harrison's 'The Wicked Flee' is typical Harrison — a good yarn with a beginning, a middle and a twist at the end. It is one of the better stories of the book, but Silverberg's introduction may make you wonder:

'Having mastered the novel of extraterrestrial adventure . . . and the novel of social criticism . . . and the novel of technological farce . . . seems currently to be investigating the possibilities of the science fiction short story — 'Mastered' indeed! Ideas of mastery must have changed. Harrison is often quite good, but never a master, and is often clumsy. In this tale, for instance, his hero, left alone at the finish, is forced to deliver a twenty-line monologue to the empty air in order to inform the reader what the story is really about.

Next comes Philip José Farmer's 'The Sliced-Crosswise Only-On-Tuesday World', which I suppose is all right if you like Farmer and those coy, gimmicky titles. This is a reworking of the idea Wyman Guinn said just about the last word on many years ago in 'Beyond Bedlam', and features a switcheroo ending you can see coming from about the fourth page.

Introducing Barry N. Malzberg's 'Conquest', Silverberg writes: 'In the maturity of any art form arrive the specialists on the put-on and the put-down: cold-eyed, acidulous commentators on the idiocies and follies of earlier practitioners.' True, but I wish he had added the rider, almost inescapable, that these commentators die before their targets, save for the very greatest. Satire is a vehicle few can ride safely, and SF history is dotted with the tombstones of those who tried once and gave it up. But take comfort in the thought that Malzberg's commentary is mild, his satire less than vicious, and his story strong enough to stand on its own legs. To discuss it in detail would be to reveal too much, and revelation is the kicker here.

And last, but most beautifully not least, comes 'the elegant and buoyant Tom Disch', with 'Emancipation: A Romance of the Times to Come'. If you know H. G.

Wells's 'Story of the Days to Come', you may enjoy the joke better but, even if you haven't, Disch's high-spirited satire on women's lib finally cutting its own throat and — mixing the metaphor — by upturning the apple cart completely and showering us with a whole new crop of domestic problems, will send you away laughing. I will tell you nothing about it. The best should always come as a surprise. Buy the book, or borrow it from a friend or other sucker, and have a little joy with one of the few *good* writers washed up by the new wave of SF.

So we have three really excellent stories — numbers 3, 5 and 14 in order of review — seven quite satisfactory tales and four reviewer's-hackle-raisers. That isn't a bad result for an anthology of new goods, particularly as the top three represent nearly forty per cent of the wordage of the volume.

In the long run, your overall reaction may well be dictated by your reaction to *New Wavery*. I can't help it if I find most of the New Wave a slick, sleight-of-hand bore, with the occasionally joymaker like Disch or Aldiss to render it bearable.

Present signs are that, save for a few noisy stalwarts furiously splashing, the New Wave has begun to ebb, and in the next year or two we will be able to see more clearly what remainder of value it has washed up on the SF shore.

Quite a lot, I imagine. It just takes time to see what is worth preserving and how much that seemed marvelous dissipates in spume.

— *SF Commentary* 39, November 1973

GEORGE TURNER'S DEBATE WITH PETER NICHOLLS

Plumbers of the cosmos: The Aussiecon debate

Transcribed by Bruce Gillespie

[**Bruce Gillespie's original introduction:** George Turner, prize-winning novelist and critic, and Peter Nicholls, editor of *Foundation* magazine, don't really hold opposing views on criticism and reviewing. But some programmer for Aussiecon (the 33rd World Science Fiction Convention, Melbourne, August 1975) thought they did, and put them on a platform to battle out their positions. Instead they agreed with each other — but from quite different viewpoints . . .]

John Foyster (moderator):

The next item is a panel titled 'Plumbers of the Cosmos'. This derives from two sources. The first is a series of incredibly boring books by Sam Moskowitz with titles rather like 'Plumbers of the Cosmos', and the second source is the fertile, or — more appropriately — the festering mind of John Bangsund, who selected that title from the various possible combinations. The speakers will be Peter Nicholls and George Turner, whom you've all heard before. The discussion will be conducted under the rules first set down under the rules of the Marquess of Queensberry. Thank you.

Peter Nicholls:

I was rather hoping to adhere to the rules set down by the notorious Mr Rafferty, actually.

George Turner:

The critics talking about critics. Welcome to the feast of jackals. We are the people who get our kicks from worrying the throats of defenceless writers. I know you believe that, too.

It isn't really true. For one thing, they're not defenceless; half the bastards are critics themselves. Believe me, the game, when it is on, is sometimes well and truly on.

First of all, I want to make a difference between reviewing and criticism. Reviewing is what most of us are more accustomed to than full-scale criticism. Reviewing normally confines itself to a description of the work, plus an opinion offered by the bloke doing the review. It's probably the most primitive form of criticism, and it's devoted to one end only: to let the readers know what is available. As far as his opinion of the book goes — well, the best thing you can do is pick the critic who, over the period, seems to go along with your ideas: he's the man you can follow.

Then you decide reviewing is a nice easy little thing you can do for your favourite fanzine. I'm here to disabuse you. It isn't. Many years ago, when I was much more game than I am now, I wrote an article for John Bangsund, called 'On Writing About Science Fiction'. It dealt with reviewing and criticism. Somewhere along the line I said this:

Criticism requires extensive knowledge of literary techniques, language and languages, philosophy, history, psychology, and a sufficient smattering of all really important subjects to be able to bone up on them at a moment's notice.

And if that sounds pretty rough, believe me, it had the blessing of James Blish, who agreed with every word of it. And he was one of the best critics the genre has ever had.

Don't be frightened, because most of you have most of that anyway. It's very surprising what you *have* got, when you look into your own grab bag of knowledge and ideas. But, before you start reviewing, please get rid of the idea that just saying, 'This is a good story because . . .' or 'This is a bad story because . . .', or 'I like it because . . .' or 'I don't like it because . . .' is enough. It isn't.

The first thing you have to find out is, 'What is this book about?' That's nice and easy, isn't it? Tell me this: what is the fairy-tale of 'Cinderella' about?

I can give you several answers. For one thing, it is about virtue triumphant. For another, it is about wickedness punished. (Or are they just opposite sides of the same thing? You have to decide that.) Thirdly, the plot has nothing to do with these things. The plot is rags to riches. You have to keep these things in mind; otherwise, your version of 'Cinderella' is liable to wind up rather different from what the man wrote down.

You have to do several things — and these are going to sound difficult.

First of all, you must separate the foreground — that is, the obvious things in the novel — from the realities

behind it. I'm going to cite, as an example, *The Dispossessed*, Ursula Le Guin's book. I've read dozens of reviews of this book, and most of them were so superficial that I had a feeling that the writers were puzzled. For myself, I had to review it three times, write two essays on it and discuss it with the Nova Mob once, so I had fair opportunity to get really into it. (And I had to read it three times, by the way.) What is *The Dispossessed* about? Everybody who talks about it starts first with politics. As soon as you begin to look at it, the politics recede. They are only part of the thing that's used. Used for what? To talk about a philosophy, as a matter of fact, which is a rather different thing. You have to ask yourself this sort of question about every book you want to describe. Aside from what is on the surface, what is the thing that's pushing behind it? You must separate mere writing from what is being said. You can take, say, one of Roger Zelazny's fantasies — I don't like them myself; you may do. Very persuasive, lush writing — but what's it all about? Oh, the words get in your eyes; they're blinding. You're liable to find out they're about pretty damn little by the time you're through. You can do the same thing with Delany at times; not always, but very often. His prose can be very beautiful, very seductive; it can lead you up the garden path time and time again. And when you've got rid of the prose and looked at what he had to say, you begin to wonder whether it was much of a garden path, after all.

You'll come up against other questions — one of them in this last panel, this matter of archetypes. It's a thing I've never bothered to think about very much. I got a little fed up with people claiming archetypes for this, that and the other. But since the thing was discussed this afternoon, I had to do a little thinking for myself, not from the angle that this panel used, but from the angle of simple literary technique. Here's something we know about science fiction: that it is not notable for character work. We know the reason: that its interest is not so much in the impact of character on character, as in environment upon character, or a sort of symbolic humanity upon environment. You're only using symbols. You're straight back into the archetypes immediately, because, as soon as you start complicating them, you start complicating your ideas out of recognition.

There's something I've had to think about, just for once, and it becomes immediately part of my critical bag of tools. Whether I'll ever find a use for it is another thing, but it's there if I need it.

So, as I say, the business of reviewing isn't just a matter of picking up your pen or dashing off on your typewriter your opinion of whether *Space Hounds of IPC* is really a better novel than *A Case of Conscience*. If you think it is, good luck to you, but you'd be the most extraordinary reviewer in existence. The fact is that these things, which I've just outlined to you, and made to sound rather difficult, are actually extremely easy. You do them unconsciously or subconsciously all the time you are reading. All you have to do is do them deliberately. When you say that you can't make up your mind about a book, then pull the damn thing to pieces and you'll soon make up your own mind. It won't spoil the book if it's any good. If it spoils the book, then the book's not that good.

That's all right for reviewing. But how about criticism? You had an example of it here, just half an hour ago. This panel on Myth and Legend was actually doing what a critic does — it was setting up a proposition and examining it, asking questions about it, considering it from this point of view and that, and coming to some conclusions. Only, instead of half a dozen people doing it, it's a job the critic has to do on his own. At that point, I think I'll drop the subject of criticism, because it's a field that's better left to somebody who knows a bit more about it than I do.

But . . . I do want to say this: If you start reviewing, do not, for God's sake, ever start off reviewing with kindness in mind. No writer worth his salt wants you to be kind; he wants to know the truth. If he's only writing for money, and writing rubbish, and knows he's writing for money and writing rubbish, then he won't give a damn what you say anyway. If he's got any kind of conscience about his work, if he's any kind of artist, he may hate what you say but, by God, he'll listen to it. He may eventually reject it and say, 'No, it's not right.' He may eventually accept it and learn something from it. One of the best lessons I ever had in my own work came from a man who was tearing it to pieces.

You may think that this business of 'What is this book really about?' could easily be settled by asking the writer. It can't. You heard Ursula remark, just in passing, about *The Tombs of Atuan*, that 'I really don't know what it was about.' This is eternally true. I wrote a novel some fifteen years ago called *The Cupboard under the Stairs*. Stephen Murray-Smith rocked me back on my heels by saying, 'Turner, whether he knows it or not, is writing politics.' This had never entered my mind. I eventually asked him about it, and he gave a surprised stare, as though it was an idiot question from an idiot child. And I have still never found out what he meant. But he saw something there that I, the writer, didn't know was there. This comes along time and time again.

A great deal of a writer's work is almost automatic. He thinks in terms of character, movement, style of language and various types of projection, but all the time there's the part of himself, right deep down, that he really doesn't know about, which is determining how that book will go. He can no more change his subconscious ideas than he can fly without wings. These subconscious ideas will hit the book, and that is your business. You eventually will know much more about his book than he ever can. This is one of the reasons why writers get up and scream when you tell them that this was wrong or that was wrong or that the book meant something quite different from what they said it did. One that springs to mind is Philip José Farmer, who is forever telling people that that wasn't what his book was about! It was. It just happens that he thought he was writing about something else. That's not a silliness on his part; it's a normal part of self-expression, that you are always saying about three times as much as you think, and the bloke who is listening hears a damn sight more than you do.

If you're going to write reviews, be honest, first of all. If you like a book, say so; say why — never forget to say why, or otherwise you're wasting your time. If you don't like it, or you think there's something wrong with it, express it and be damn sure you've nailed it down. If

you come to pieces of raving idiocy, like *The Skylark of Space*, always remember that, no matter how bad and how foolish the thing is, that book created a revolution in science fiction. It's your business, as a critic or as a reviewer, to ask the question, 'Why? What was there? What haven't I seen from my superior eminence?'

Don't pull your punches but, on the other hand, don't set in with both boots to leave a bleeding corpse. Any mug can do that with any book. You can rip *War and Peace* to pieces without any trouble if you really set your mind to it. Just remember, though, that *War and Peace* is bigger than you are — or me, or anyone else. To merely rip into a book because something about it displeases you is neither good criticism nor good reviewing nor fair play. Be violent if you like, but make damn sure that you're right.

Peter Nicholls:

It's always more fun for the audience if there can be real hammer-and-tongs argument. I'd like to turn around and say that I'd never heard such a bunch of rubbish in my life.

I won't, actually. I pretty much agree with what George says. I don't think he said enough, but if he had, I would have had nothing to say.

George says what the critic does. I'm not sure that he's argued his case for his social function. That's what I'd like to talk about. A lot of writers have expressed to me the view that the critic hasn't earned the right. A writer sweats over a novel for a year, two years, four years, and the critic can have a few beers on a Friday night, sit at his typewriter for an hour and a half, and get into the newspaper with a Saturday morning deadline. It is very easy, indeed, for a critic to be totally irresponsible.

The justification for being a critic is that he does represent the reader. He doesn't need to have a right to do that; he is himself the reader. His job is simply to be a sort of articulate reader and, to some extent, to stand up for the rights of the reader when talking back to the novelist himself. This is all general stuff about criticism, no matter what you're criticising.

When you turn to science fiction, it seems to me that the critic has a very simple social function. I don't know how long all of you have been reading SF: probably, some of you, not terribly long. Now things have changed, as you've heard many people say on this platform. But these days, if you walk into Space Age Book Shop, or into any large SF bookshop in any large city in the world, you'll find yourself with 800, 1000, 2000 possible books you can buy. In the first place, you don't have the faintest idea what you like. You like what you first picked up, what turned you on. It might be John Wyndham; it might be Isaac Asimov. Well, okay; you buy *The Chrysalids*, then you buy *The Kraken Wakes*, and then you buy *The Day of the Triffids*. Sooner or later, you've gone through Wyndham, and you don't know where to go from there.

It seems to me that the critic can help guide you through this labyrinth, and the only way he can do that honestly is by giving you milestones. There's a critical argument that's gone on for many years, and will always go on. To some extent, it was the United Kingdom versus America at one point, where the critics in England used to make value judgments all over the place:

'This book is good'; 'That book is bad'. (I'm simplifying appallingly, and apologise to any teachers of literature in the audience.) The American attitude was a little bit more, 'We have no right to make value judgments; they're subjective. Our job as critics must be simply to point to what is in the book in as objective a way as possible and to leave it at that.' I personally incline to the English view. In order, I think, to value all the best things in life, you need to know what the worst things are. In order to know what a really good steak is like, you need to have had a burnt steak at some point to compare it with. It's exactly the same with reading books.

I'm here to say that the critics have not done justice to science fiction. I am here to say that there is not yet one good book on science fiction, and no particular signs that there's going to be a really good book on science fiction for a while yet. This is a very sad state of affairs.

I'd like to be deliberately offensive, I suppose. I'd like to make a list of some of the things that seem to have been wrong with the criticism of science fiction so far. You could put them into little groups. (I hope I don't insult people who are here, or friends of people who are here, too badly.)

The first kind of criticism SF suffered from for years was ghetto criticism. The ghetto mentality was because they felt under attack. In all ghettos, you hide behind the walls. In a ghetto, you even develop a secret language very often, as fandom has done in science fiction. You've probably heard some of it already. The ghetto critics reckoned that outsiders can't really talk about science fiction because there are special rules with which you must criticise it, and only they had the God-given gift of knowing what these rules were. To name names: Sam Moskowitz and Donald Wollheim are the two best-known ghetto critics. They never, in fact, do state what the standards are inside the ghetto, but all is chumminess and camaraderie, except that they can get an extraordinary note of vitriol in their voices when it comes round to those writers who have perhaps tried to knock down the walls of the ghetto a little bit.

Donald Wollheim wrote a book called *The Universe Makers*, published in England by Gollancz and, in America, by Harper & Row, some four years ago. He writes interestingly and enthusiastically about a number of everybody's favourite science fiction writers, but he gets his dander up about some of them; he's very uneasy. But the real giveaway is the writers he does not mention in that book: Alfred Bester, James Blish, Philip K. Dick, Thomas M. Disch, Ursula Le Guin, Charles Harness, Frank Herbert, Henry Kuttner, Walter Miller and William Tenn. That's a list I made up at one point; there are many others not mentioned.

What do these writers have, that Wollheim did not want to mention them? Brains. In other words, ghetto criticism has been traditionally anti-intellectual. It wants the Golden Age back again: it wants the same sort of stories . . . There are some very good writers whom Wollheim does like. One of them is, for instance, our own Bert Chandler. Wollheim likes him because he's always been a very good story-teller. I'm not claiming that everything Wollheim likes is bad at all; he likes a lot

of good, traditional virtues in science fiction that I think we all like. But there are certain things he doesn't like.

Another, perhaps more sophisticated group of critics include Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest — and perhaps Brian Aldiss belongs to this group. I think of them as being the elegant slummers. These are the men who, as they all tell us in introductions and at conventions, used to dash down to Woolworths during the War with their threepenny bits and buy the new copy of *Astounding*. For them, it's an incredible nostalgic romance that science fiction had for them when they were children.

Now they've all grown up since then. All three men are novelists in their own right. They know perfectly well what the standards of the literary world are outside but, because they have this nostalgic boyhood affection . . . Kingsley Amis was perhaps the worst offender. He actually does, in effect, in a much more sophisticated way, exactly what Moskowitz and Wollheim do. He disapproves of anything later than Arthur C. Clarke, in effect. He disapproves terribly of J. G. Ballard, described by Kingsley Amis as 'that great self-destroyed talent' — an interesting, and possibly partly accurate phrase. But there's a heavy air of disapproval.

I can describe it best by saying that these are men who are knowing to the point of cynicism in other respects, but appear to see in science fiction a little patch of nostalgic innocence where everything is simpler and more clear cut. In adulthood, just like roistering bravos from the Court seeking out a jolly pub with buxom barmaids at the poor end of town, they enjoy slumming. But everything is spoiled for the experienced slummer if he becomes a leader of fashion. The image I used was that wonderful little East End pub where you could find Cockneys singing Cockney songs and so on. It gets in the gossip columns. Next time you go there, you find Lord Snowdon and Bernard Levin there. The whole atmosphere's no good at all.

This is exactly the relationship that I diagnosed between Amis and Conquest on the one hand, and science fiction on the other. SF's been spoiled for them by its ever-increasing popularity among others of their class. Hence all the grumbling about the New Wave, the querulous harkings-back to the 'good old days'; all those *Spectrum* anthologies they did which consisted almost entirely of stories from *Astounding* and from no other source.

This is accompanied by a kind of lack of seriousness in their criticism. Amis will not be sufficiently harsh, in fact. He carelessly loves SF, but he feels a little bit ashamed of himself for doing it. Like a true promiscuous rake, one feels an emptiness behind it all. He seems to imply it would be an error in good taste to import real critical values from the great world outside into the jolly, noisy slums of SF with their scarlet lights glimmering through the polluted fog.

Even Brian Aldiss, a man I very much admire, is to some extent guilty of this. In his book *Billion Year Spree*, which, I think, is by a fairly long margin the best book we have so far on science fiction, I still find some of this note, some of this . . . tear of nostalgic joy rolling down his face when he talks about the old Frank R. Paul covers . . . A sophisticated kitsch. It's a kind of camp.

One of the things I don't like about SF cons is all this

talk about the lurid covers of the past, talking about them in all seriousness, as if they were in fact much better than what was happening in surrealism in the thirties, in the great world outside. There's something extraordinarily self-indulgent about this. Not that I want to stop people collecting this stuff; I collect it myself. I must admit that I'm ambiguous on the whole question.

I'm leaving out the obviously bad sorts of critics. They're the ones who stand up in public, like Dr Jonathan Miller did on a BBC television program some four years ago, saying, 'I really know nothing about science fiction but I'm prepared to say that it's all total rubbish for the following reasons.' He'd read one book, and he might even be completely right about that one book, but he hasn't looked at the other two thousand.

More recently, there's a new kind of critic who worries me a bit, and sometimes I think I'm one myself, but I can think of better examples, probably not well known here. John Clute, for example, who writes criticism in *New Worlds*.

I'm not sure how to describe these characters. They are a little bit self-indulgent. Us critics of science fiction have total freedom, you see, to say anything we like, because there are no rules yet. It's not really yet an academic subject. It's becoming so in the United States, but not yet in the United Kingdom, and certainly not in Australia. Most of the critics of science fiction are academics taking a holiday. They're not bound by the rules. So you get a kind of criticism which is racy, sophisticated, ironic, self-serving, full of little in-jokes. This is also what is true of the best of fanzine criticism, as a matter of fact. Often obscurantist in the extreme.

I can best describe this by reading part of a criticism by John Clute of Aldiss's novel *The Eighty-Minute Hour*:

But to try to shift this rhetoric of communion into the matrix of a book's voice (as in *The Eighty-Minute Hour*, for instance, or in *Nova*) simply and fundamentally can't be done, for a book is not a session, nor does its implied author genuinely communicate with hypostasised fans because he (the shape of the implied Aldiss) precisely is the text itself (as we've already claimed), all else being ventriloquism. Having dreamed the impossible fan, the implied Aldiss (like Theodore Sturgeon and Robert A. Heinlein and Samuel R. Delany) must take responsibility for any gaffes engendered by that false relation; authorship as an oration to fans confuses composition with performance, and creates that rhetoric of connivance with which the reader (a real fan, say) may well be complicit, because it seems flattering, but which ultimately grates the teeth.

I'm sure that none of you got that first time through. What's interesting is that, the second time through, it's an awfully good point.

SF criticism doesn't really need this. What it needs, I believe (which is what I try to push in *Foundation*) is a kind of voice which is mid way between the fannish and the ghetto on the one hand, and the academic on the other. It's the voice of simple sanity. George Turner, in

fact, very much has this voice as a critic. It's the voice of directness.

The critic must always think of himself as taking part in a dialogue where he's trying to help to explain. Even if he doesn't like a book, it's his duty to try to see, at its best, what that book might be; what it could be.

The sort of criticism that I find, personally, most valuable is criticism written of books that the critic has actually liked. You may read a book by, say, Jimmy Ballard, say *The Atrocity Exhibition*. You might say: well, that's interesting, but I can't quite see what Ballard's on about. And because, in fact, you can't see it, you might get cross with the author. You might think to yourself, 'Oh well, pretentious prick anyway; I'm not interested in this sort of stuff.' But the good critic can lead you back to that book and show you that Ballard's not pretentious because there is no 'pretence' involved — he is doing something genuine, if odd, but the first time through, you missed what he was doing. This is precisely, it seems to me, where the critic of science fiction has a function.

Now there are a number of good critics of science fiction coming along, and I personally believe that science fiction cannot fully reach maturity until its critics reach maturity. The two things will happen — I hope George agrees with me here — very much hand in hand.

Turner:

I must agree with that, but I think we must point out at this time that bad criticism has done a great deal to hold back science fiction. When I came into science fiction about six or seven years back, when people started showering me with fanzines and so on, I was absolutely appalled at the reviewing. I really set myself out, quite deliberately, to change the attitude towards reviewing among fans in this country.

The first thing I did was an article called 'On Writing About Science Fiction', which John Bangsund published, which, surprisingly to me, caught on with a bang all over the place. Even Harry Warner in America went so far as to say that it ought to be republished once a year, which is possibly taking it a bit far. But still, it made me feel that the attempt was worthwhile. Bruce Gillespie swears that he uses it as his own reviewing bible — he does nothing of the sort, because his methods are as different from mine as you can get. Not that they are any better or any worse, but just different.

But this business about reviewing, or criticism — we'll use the word interchangeably for the time being — must take notice of the fact that the word 'ghetto' should never have been used in the first place and it's time we dropped it. We're talking about, and we have on several occasions during the last few days, and the reason, all the time, has been that it's outdated. Now I said, and I meant, two days ago, that the writers and the fans between them created this ghetto, and preserved it, and shored up the walls and kept mending them each time they looked like falling down. Lousy reviewing was no small part of it. They adopted a double standard: 'Because it's science fiction, therefore we review it as science fiction, and not as written literature.' The moment you do that, you are condemning the work. You are turning thumbs down on it. You are saying, in effect, that we are not game to put this up against the rest of literature.

Thank God there were people like Brian Aldiss, Walter Miller, Jim Ballard and a few more, who were game to say, 'We can write literature. We can write well. We can write something that will stand up against work in other genres', and they went ahead and did it.

And yet, God help me, one of the first things I came to, even four or five years ago, was John Bangsund's talk about the double standard, about the necessity of judging science fiction by its own set of values. To hell with that! If science fiction needs a special set of values, then it isn't literature; it's something else. And the sooner we find out, the better.

My own line is that it must be judged as good work. There's only one difference between science fiction and the mainstream; that's a technical difference. You were told in this last panel that the mainstream takes out the fourth wall. A few writers go beyond that and take out what you would call the fourth wall of the mind, so that you get a look further in. Science fiction does not do that so much because it does not concentrate so much on character, on the impact of people on people. So it dispenses with one of the prime qualities that we've come to associate with literature.

It puts in something else, though. You can't just throw away the rules and not put something in their place. What it puts in their place is that opposite thing, a reversal of the impacts, or a discussion of impacts of a different nature — not of people upon people, but of people upon the universe, and of the universe upon people. That is the only significant difference that needs to be observed when you're reviewing science fiction against any other type of fiction. You will very rarely review a science fiction book in which you're involved purely with the characters. If you're reviewing D. G. Compton, you just might be. I can't think of anybody else.

So don't feel for one moment that science fiction has to be treated differently from the rest of the canon of literature. The moment you treat it differently is an act of betrayal. The moment you accept somebody else doing it, you've committed another act of betrayal. It must stand on its own feet, and fight back.

Nicholls:

I think that's absolutely true, but there's one special difficulty that the critic of SF has. There is a practical difference between science fiction and the mainstream. It's not an absolute difference at all. It's this: most traditional novelists of psychological realism are not full-time novelists. They've usually other jobs. Often they are journalists, academics, teachers — maybe even house-builders or postmen.

In the genres, you often find full-time writers — perhaps forty or fifty people in the world who make a full-time living from science fiction. By doing that, they knowingly subject themselves to commercial pressure, and it's broken many.

It seems to me that the one thing the critic can do is help to give the good pulp writer the reputation he might genuinely deserve — the outstanding example would be Philip K. Dick — in order to take some of the actual pressures off that man. Bob Silverberg is a man who has written, in a book called *Hell's Cartographers*, about the incredible output that he had in his first ten

years of writing science fiction. Really incredible. It wasn't just that he could write a book in three weeks, another in the second three weeks, and a third in the third three weeks. Bob is the first to admit that this did not help his writing. He's a naturally good writer, who wrote a lot of sloppy and lazy stuff. I'm prepared to take that example because Bob confesses it himself. But I'm sure we could all name names. An example that is often quoted, for example, is Roger Zelazny. People talk of him as if Zelazny is a hack these days, but he's not. His first couple of novels have very fine qualities indeed — this is agreed by a lot of people. They started going downhill. It happens again and again and again in science fiction.

The other pressure for commercial writers is to keep on writing your first novel. If you go back and look at the great names of science fiction and see how many of them have written their first novel over and over again, it's a very frightening thing.

So these are the pressures which are perhaps stronger on genre writers. It's also perhaps true of westerns, detective stories — not just science fiction.

You may wonder if the critic can affect those things at all. I mean, if these people have to churn the stuff out, no matter how basically good they are as writers, what's the point of the critic saying, 'Well, Andre Norton might be a good writer, but she shouldn't have written ninety novels.' Andre Norton, presumably, has to write ninety novels in order to keep her children going to a decent school. I think, though, that this is not a reason for us to be soft on the science fiction writers. It is all the more reason to be tough on them, but with the ultimate hope that what is a very grim situation . . . I can think of only about four science fiction writers in the world who have actually made much money from it, and even Bob, who is quite a wealthy man, has made more money from his non-fiction than from his science fiction. Arthur Clarke is now very wealthy from his science fiction but, by God, he wasn't for twenty-five years. It was only after *2001: A Space Odyssey* that he made it financially. Isaac Asimov is wealthy but, there again, much more from his non-fiction than from his science fiction. Perhaps Robert Heinlein is the only man who has made quite a lot of real money from science fiction exclusively.

The critic's job is not just to help the fans but to encourage the great world outside to see that this is a real literature which, once it starts happening, and it is happening now, publishers will start treating SF writers as real people and they won't keep giving them such rotten deals, as they did in the old days. An example is Brian Aldiss's novel *Non-Stop*, which many people think is his best. It was his first SF novel to be published. That novel sold world rights for £60. Aldiss has never got another penny from that book. It was world rights — forever.

Turner:

Even I have never done that badly.

Nicholls:

It helped him, of course. He got a name, and he got a better deal on his second book. But it is a tragedy that a very fine book — a science fiction classic — should . . . it's like the famous story of John Milton writing *Paradise*

Lost for a fiver. But a fiver was probably worth a lot more in the seventeenth century than £60 was worth in 1958.

Turner

You mentioned Philip Dick and Bob Silverberg. The mention of Philip Dick brings me to something that I was having to put in at some stage in this talk. It's this book, *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*, which you will see on sale in the lobby. It's a product of Bruce Gillespie and Carey Handfield. It consists purely of science fiction criticism of Philip Dick. If you are at all interested in criticism, or in reviewing, or in writing for fanzines, this is a book which you will do quite well to have with you. It contains practically the whole spectrum of such fanzine criticism and reviewing as is generally available to us. It contains letters, with just odd remarks that happened to be to the purpose, It contains full-scale reviews of special books. It contains a very lengthy examination of Philip Dick himself, from the point of view of a man who's trying to work out precisely the patterns of Dick's progress. It contains a completely idiotic essay by a very intelligent man, Stanislaw Lem. Unfortunately, it doesn't contain some of the things which have been said about that essay since. It concludes with an essay by myself, which contains something which I should like to make a point about.

This essay was written many, many months after I had read *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*. When I read that book first, I thought . . . ah, it's all right; I enjoyed it. Then, quite unexpectedly, months later, when I thought I had dealt with it forever, Bruce asked me to write a review of it. I thought, oh well, I'll do the right thing and look at it again. On the second reading, an entirely different book emerged. I had been guilty the first time of reading the surface only, because it just did not catch me where it should have done. There were things wrong with the book which accounted for part of that, too. The thing I want to point out is that this is one of the things that you, as critic, must avoid. I have said that often the writer does not know what he is doing. The other side of the coin is that you, the critic, often don't see what he is doing. I've had the same experience with other books. What you have to do when this occurs is to make a public and honest *mea culpa*: 'I was wrong, I was wrong; *this* is the review I should have written.' I've done this more than once, and I'll keep on doing it.

A critic, like anybody else, must continue to learn, get new ideas, to progress in his art. Criticism is an art — one of the minor ones, but an art, nonetheless. And if I find what I said five years ago was wrong, then I'm

going to stand up and say so and talk about the thing that is really right. The whole of critical literature is a continuing series of re-evaluations. It's these re-evaluations which finally serve to produce the continuing basis of literature. That also changes. The critic doesn't direct the course of literature; what he tries to do is make it plain.

One of the things I've often had said to me is that I've been terribly hard, at times, on Bob Silverberg. Well, Bob and I haven't poked daggers in each other's backs over it. We have talked about it. But a closer reading of what I have written would show that I've always paid a great deal of respect to Silverberg, to what he has written and to what he has edited. The thing about Silverberg is that he's a bloke who's *worth* paying attention to.

Don't waste your time criticising the rubbish. Go for the people who have it to give you good work. Never hit a man who's too small to hit back, because that way neither of you will learn anything. Not so long ago, I criticised Silverberg as an editor, and one of the stories he published as a load of rubbish. That was not done in a fit of spite, or just to show that I, the critic, knew rather better than he or his writer. It was done because I honestly believe that it is only, in a great sense, by the improvement of criticism and by pulling no punches in criticism, that we will eventually get the kind of science fiction that is capable of being produced by capable writers and editors. (Don't forget the editors; they're often as important as the writers.)

Nicholls:

A very last word. Obviously, as you can see from both of us, the besetting sin of the literary critic has always been intellectual arrogance. It's a necessary sin, in a way; if you don't have that, you never have the guts to take on the job in the first place. But, of course, if you're arrogant, you don't need guts; you simply go ahead and do it anyway.

But I finish with this thought. This panel was titled 'Plumbers of the Cosmos'. John Bangsund probably had in mind that the science fiction writers are the plumbers of the cosmos, Let's think of it this way. The science fiction critics are the plumbers of the cosmos and it is our job to keep the drains of science fiction flowing freely.

— *SF Commentary* 48/49/50, October/November/December 1976

George and the Community of Writers

THE 1977 MONASH WRITERS' WORKSHOP

A murmuration of starling or an exaltation of lark?

Illustrations by Chris Johnston

When the subject of literary workshops was discussed at a 1976 convention in Melbourne I was surprised at the number of speakers who registered doubt about the efficacy of these affairs and equally surprised at the nature of some of these doubts. Having at that time little faith in the ultimate value of such training runs, though for reasons very different from those offered by the convention attendees, I was in two minds when Kitty Vigo suggested that I should participate in the SF workshop at Monash University in February 1977.

I accepted for what seemed to me a good enough reason: that the only way to justify or overcome my distrust was to take part. So I became whatever it is one becomes under such circumstances — moderator? dutch uncle? ring-master? — for one week, sandwiched between Vonda McIntyre and Chris Priest.

Here, for what they are worth, are the observations of one who saw himself as a sort of senior guinea pig in a very experimental maze-run.

I

Taking the second week of the course suited me well. I reckoned that Vonda, as an old alumna of the Clarion workshops, would operate in much the same fashion as Ursula Le Guin had done eighteen months earlier, and would hand over to me a reasonably cohesive group properly grounded in discussion techniques — to the point, that is, of being able to criticise frankly without being merely offensive and to accept criticism without the twin egoisms of resentment or despair. And that is exactly what she did, for which heaven be praised. Which brings me to the first tripstone of my distrust . . .

For those uncertain of how a typical workshop is conducted, the basic procedure is this:

Stories are written by the workshopers, xeroxed so that a copy is provided for every member, then exposed to the mass criticism of the group. Members may choose to rewrite workshoped stories on the basis of the criticisms given or to use the knowledge and insights gained in the production of new work. The moderator may require certain types of stories to be attempted (I remember with glee the crash of jaws hitting the pavement of dismay when Ursula demanded an SF love story) or

may suggest specific 'exercises'. Quoting Ursula's example again, she required a story solely in dialogue and obtained some interesting and ingenious results. The idea of exercises stuck in my mind, to emerge later in a different guise for a different purpose.

Back to my distrusts:

The matter of mass criticism was the first. Those who have read *The Altered I* will recall the record of the workshoping of Ursula's own story, and so do I, with the feeling that the book might have given a better impression had it been omitted.

Literary criticism, even of the most obvious nature, is no simple area for learners, and most, though by no means all, of our workshopers were learners. It is easy to decide that you like or dislike a story; for anyone with fiction in his writing fingers it should be easy also to discover not only *what* he likes or dislikes but *why* he does so. So you would think, but read a few fanzine reviewers to discover the number of quite intelligent people who handle the *why* less than competently. In fact the penetrating of apparent simplicities to discern *what* is wrong and why it is wrong, within the parameters of the tale, is more than can reasonably be asked of beginners.

For one thing, it requires that the critic have a literary philosophy which allows the major relationships — plot, characterisation, theme, etc. — to be observed in their complex interaction so that a weakness can be detected with the direct ease of a von Karajan pinpointing a single wrong note in a Wagnerian ensemble. (Since there is no single received literary philosophy, no two critics will agree *in toto*, but this is not very important. What matters is that each must have a set of efficient literary tools which will allow him to move rapidly and cleanly to the source of a problem. A happy few are born with insight; it takes most of us years of reading and writing to achieve it.)

This proved less of a problem than I had feared. That I did not have to deal with criticism of the generalising, basically insensitive kind was probably due very much to the groundbreaking of Vonda, who turned out to be a no-nonsense lass of much practical application and no little ability as a moulder of individuals into a group.



The 1977 Workshoppers — Chris Johnston's 'Apologies to J. C.': (From left:) Bruce Barnes, Sharon Goodman, Petrina Smith, Micheline Tang, (unknown), Randal Flynn, George Turner (Writer in Residence, second week), Philippa Maddern, Kitty Vigo (Organiser), Ted Mundie, Christopher Priest (Writer in Residence, third week), Vonda McIntyre (Writer in Residence, first week).

And also to the influence, showing very strongly in discussion, of such experienced workshoppers as Pip Maddern and Ted Mundie, who could bring both classical method and inborn literacy to bear, and do much, by their attitudes, to prevent group criticism degenerating into superficialities.

So I was able to move into fairly esoteric areas without courting misunderstanding — except in the matter of 'characterisation', which is and always has been one of the great hurdles over which both critics and writers tumble in heaps. After one grumble of discontent from the workshoppers I shelved it as impossible to sort out in a few short days, and filed in my mind the idea that a workshop devoted solely to the problems of characterisation (they are immense) might pay dividends.

2

It is worth noting at this point that plain workshopping of each others' work, day after day, exhibits a decreasing intellectual hold on all but the uncritically enthusiastic. At the end of the first week the Monash group was feeling the need for a change of pace or the introduction of novelty. It was not that they felt the workshopping technique was unsatisfactory but that, having developed it to a point of routine, some new thing was needed.

Since I had some experimental ideas of my own, this indication suited my purpose, the more so in that my purpose arose in part from consideration of the second of my tripstones of distrust — enthusiasm, far too much of it.

I was horrified at the way in which Ursula's group tore into the work, producing fiction like those Hoe presses which print about 120,000 newspapers an hour. 'It can't last,' I thought then, but by God it did. To this day I have a suspicion that some of them took no sleep at all but zombied through their mass production on incantations and psychokinesis. Certain it is that they beat hell out of their typewriters until the wee hours were themselves exhausted, yet turned up next morning not only on time but with completed stories and claws freshly honed for the opposition.

(This may be defensiveness on my part. My habits of

work are so slapdash that John Iggulden once cried out, 'But nobody can write a novel like that!' — I had by then written five — which doesn't mean that he wasn't, in a deeper sense, right.)

I was not the only one who felt a danger in this. At the '76 convention in Melbourne several speakers voiced the possibility that this surge of effort harboured a seed of quasi-hysterical motivation and that the result might be a crippling letdown of enthusiasm once the breakneck course was done.

Something of this in fact happened after both Ursula's workshop and the Monash period, but not in any total sense. For one thing, Ursula's group made some effort to keep in touch with each other and with her, which says something for the spirit of the operation; for another, several of them turned up again at the Monash classes (if 'classes' is the word), which argues that the letdown was only temporary.

My feeling is that the real writer, the one whose only diet is red-black ribbon, cannot be deterred, crushed, or blown out by anything short of the collapse of civilisation. Even then they'll be found elaborating new alphabets on cave walls.

But dedicated writers are not the sum total of literary effort, or even the whole of the best of literature, and the more sober talent is the one which may come to harm. These blindingly enthusiastic sessions can produce good work for only a limited period; on the other hand, they now and then bring to the surface one of those *tours de force* which spring to life on the page and are inexplicable in their issuance from the worst writers as well as the best.

With all this in mind I wished not to make too many demands on the physical endurance of my group, and was in consequence greeted early on with a wail of incomprehension, as though the brutes *wanted* to be lashed and beaten. But they realised before all was done that I had my own bastardries to offer and that there are literary brutalities other than mere drudgery into the dawn hours.

3

My approach to the job of moderator, wearing my other



Vonda McIntyre, 1977 (Drawing: Chris Johnston)

hat as ringmaster, was an all-out assault on the problem of the individual 'voice'.

Those Australians who have written saleable SF have, with few exceptions, adopted the standard styles of the American or English magazines for which they were designed. This is true also of the work done at Ursula's workshop — the tales were original, often highly so, but the voice of the prose belonged overseas and too often the strain of imitation showed.

In a country with too little indigenous SF this is perhaps inevitable among the younger writers, who are mostly (they'll hate me for this) still in the uncritical-admiration stage of their literary experience. But it is unfortunate amongst the older ones who, if their eyes are too firmly fixed on the adventurous stars to observe the realities around them, will remain self-indulgent second-raters catering to a culturally poverty-stricken public. (For some this is satisfaction enough. Neither workshop nor other stimulus can do anything there; we can only regret and ignore.)

Before my week began I read some thirty stories from the twelve workshopers; most of them belonged in the stream of typical American or British SF, with a leaning towards the blandness of the English. There were exceptions. Two of these, crying aloud their individual notes, were by the oldest and youngest in the group.

The oldest, Ted Mundie, had published before and had plainly learned from models other than SF; he was not the best stylist of the group, but his work, sometimes patchy, was at its best the freshest produced at the workshop; in fact he turned out one story, *not* SF, which was not only uncriticisable in its own right but wholly unlike anything else I have read anywhere.

Sharon Goodman, the youngest, is the fifteen-year-old daughter of a country minister of religion, not very interested in SF or fantasy as such but passionately determined to write and to be among writers; her 'voice', not fully formed and not flattened by imitation, was a small literary music. She didn't turn out anything



Christopher Priest, 1977 (Drawing: Chris Johnston)

marvellous, but 'marvellous' is not the touchstone; it is the spark that one watches for, caught flying sometimes out of bad work whose very errors are its signs of promise. It was not necessary to tell Sharon she had it; in her heart she already knew.

Then there was that sophisticated Pip Maddern, far and away the best stylist to surface in these workshop sessions, whose work is already personal and recognisable. She will know what I mean in saying that her literary voice is not finally 'placed' yet; but it is new and strong.

So, out of twelve there were nine to be chivied into writing something neither American nor English; not necessarily obviously Australian either, but something not conditioned by previous reading.

To this end, after some harmless discussion to establish an amicable atmosphere, necessary because Micheline Tang had been freezing everybody's blood with tales of how this ferocious critic ate little writers two at a time before breakfast, I set an exercise which convinced some of them that Micheline was right.

It was this: There is an alien in your backyard. Write me the beginning of a story, showing how you encountered him/her/it.

Aliens, of course, are meat and drink to the SF writer; anyone can create a dozen a day without breathing hard. But the backyard bit was peculiar, no? Ah, well, you could always invent a suitably SF/ fantasy backyard . . .

Oh, no, you couldn't. In this exercise it had to be your own backyard, the one at home, outside your back door. (How could anyone be expected to write SF about that dreary dump?) Furthermore, it had to be presented *alive*. It was the ambience of the story-to-be, that backyard, and I wanted to be able to see it, smell it, almost touch it — cats, woodheap, vegetable patch, dustbins, rusty iron gate and all. Nobody would get away with 'it was winter on the beach' or 'autumn in the park' on the ground that everybody knows what the beach and the park look like. (They don't, you know. It is surprising



Bruce Barnes, 1977 (Photo: George Turner Estate collection)

how many people have never seen the things they are looking at.)

To make it worse, this description had to be integrated, not just a 'descriptive bit'; it had to be essential to the meaning. SF is overloaded on the one hand with 'descriptive bits' that don't assist the story (Clifford Simak, for example) and on the other with neglected, barely implied backgrounds which don't exist for the reader because the writer has never envisioned them properly.

The integration problem defeated at least half the class. Imagination put to work on a practical problem instead of being allowed to roam free suddenly showed as less than the effervescent talent SF loves to claim for itself. (It has always been my unpopular opinion that the average SF writer is singularly unimaginative; ninety per cent of SF is cannibalisation of a few basic ideas.)

However, Pip Maddern solved the problem in the simplest and most direct way by making her alien look like a piece of washing on the clothesline, while Petrina tied it all up in a single bundle by making the entire yard an alien presence. But Bruce Barnes cried out bitterly that his place didn't have a backyard. This was very nearly true (I know that block of flats) but we were not in the sympathy business so I put on my 'unrelenting' look — which children and small puppies tend to see through at once — and left him with it. So Bruce put ingenuity to work and had his protagonist locked out of the house and at the mercy of an alien. The attempts to find a way of escape showed just how much there is about the apparently featureless back wall of a block of flats that can be used to further both action and atmosphere in the right situation. And the back wall is part of

the yard, isn't it?

The test of creativity and ingenuity was not popular with the class, and I did not labour the point that most of them had been found wanting in a matter basic to the art of writing — the appreciation and management of simple reality. Not even fantasy can exist on dreams alone; the appeal of *The Lord of the Rings* is rooted in the fact that its wildest flights are always tied to the commonplaces of everyday life. That the class took the point without reminding was shown by their approach to a later variation on the exercise.

But where, anecdote aside, does the 'personal voice' come in? It comes in with the selection of a real backyard as thematic centre. You simply cannot describe your own Australian backyard with an English or American accent and remain honest — and the writer who isn't honest in his work is a predestined tenth-rater. As soon as you begin the description you are assaulted by the need for truthful rather than borrowed expression; you are yourself, looking through your own eyes instead of through eyes blinkered by the prose of Silverberg or Vance or Heinlein. Instead of a waste-disposal chute (which you lifted from somebody's story and never bothered to visualise) you have a plain old dustbin. Instead of the 'gorgeously tinted blooms' of the high priestess's garden (which you couldn't describe because you've never thought about it except as a bit of cheap exotica) you have those bloody sunflowers that look as though a hungry goat has been at them and the nasturtium patch by the back gate, which you remember because Mum insists the leaves make good salad sandwiches. And where Gar Funkel would have sixth-sensed the alien presence and had his laser finger ready extended against trouble, you have only you, without even five senses fully used, let alone a sixth for aliens, and not even a peashooter for protection.

You are back to telling the truth. And that is where a personal style begins. The personal style is your individual way of seeing and reporting, the one thing that makes your work truly yours. (If you are satisfied to plug along the paths worn by a thousand other pulp magazine twits, do so. But stay away from workshops, particularly mine; you will only be taking up the time needed for the writers.)

In general, this aspect of the exercise was a failure on this first occasion. At least half simply did not know how to describe familiar things.

But even the failures were in a sense a success. To learn that there is something essential which you can't do is more useful than attracting praise for something you do easily.

4

For the second exercise I forsook SF altogether. (And why not? Does anybody really imagine that the principles of good writing change from genre to genre? To write SF you must first be able to *write*.) What I required was a description, a section of a story, telling of a man or woman on the run (for whatever reason the writer chose to dream up) through that part of Monash University in which we were living and working, i.e. from the dining room to the sleeping quarters via a large partially enclosed garden court.

You will spot the essential difference, that the first

exercise was in static description, requiring integration of background and theme, whereas the second was plainly concentrated on the running man while the background could be used only as it affected his movements. The first was an exercise in integration, the second in selectivity. In both cases the writer was limited by reality, which was my method of pointing out that the strange is always with us, that we don't have to travel for synthetic kicks to the emerald cities of Polaris 3.

Again, of course, the personal 'voice' was a built-in requirement, because none of the workshopers was going to believe in an 'imported' treatment of the surroundings they could observe by opening their eyes.

(Digression: When at the 1976 BOFcon I raised this question of the Australian 'voice' in a national SF, together with the necessity of using the real world as a means of adding a dimension of reality to fantasy, Bruce Gillespie supported me but in general we were treated to the peculiarly resentful silence of people who suspect that you are trying to take something from them, when in fact we were trying to tell them how much they were missing. Readers still want to escape to Old Barsoom when they never really looked at the world they are trying to escape from. As for the Australian 'voice', they simply couldn't see the point; they preferred even their dreams with a foreign accent. What's more, they saw no dishonesty in accepting the Australian Literature Board's financial support, then diverting the money to the second-rate imitation of a foreign culture. Sometimes I wonder about fans . . .)

Faced with this exercise, it would never have occurred to me to go further than my desk and, with the total ambience in mind, concentrate on the dramatic requirements of the task. I was surprised, though perhaps I should not have been, to see how many of the class actually had to go out and reconnoitre an area they had been living in for about ten days, to examine it as though they had never seen it before. And, of course, they *hadn't* really seen it before. (And perhaps the backyard exercise had undermined the confidence of some; it certainly should have done.) This matter of lack of adequate visualisation of one's own surroundings troubled me, but it was obviously not possible to attack it or even give it proper thought in the couple of days remaining to me; but if I ever again operate in a workshop it will be included somewhere in my plan of campaign.

The reconnaissance produced some unexpected results. The level of realism was much higher this time, though the idea of conveying speed of action by using 'speed-sounding' words instead of words which simply *mean* 'speed' (i.e. 'ran like a rabbit' is faster sounding than 'moved at a terrific speed') was disappointingly vague. The immediacy of observation was also better, though I recall a complaint levelled against Bruce Barnes's exercise, that nobody could take a certain flight of steps in a single stride, even with all hell on his fleeing tail. But Bruce is over six feet and about five nine of that is legs; he not only could but did take the flight in a stride while researching his flight plan.

Another happy memory is of Micheline being wildly surprised that she could manage it at all, and that physical description actually could be partly integrated and partly implied in her heavily internalised style,

which tends to lean almost completely on the protagonist's view of his or her own 'inner space'. Her exercise was indeed one of the better ones. Other productions suggested that she was not alone in recognising an introduction to possibilities previously unconsidered.

That last is, I think, very much part of what Vonda and Chris and I were there for. Chris, as it happened, didn't approve of my exercises; but then, I never approve of what anyone else does in these affairs, either.

Dealing with creativity is very much a wary progress through the dark — in psychological terms we don't even know what creativity is — and few of us feel our ways along the same paths. All we have in common is the sigh of relief when we find we have shoved someone else a little closer to the light.

5

One side issue to this exercise is worth noting. Ted Mundie restricted his 'man in flight' to the dining room, from the cash desk to the exit door, and offered a carefully recreated vision of the whole scene. It was visually effective, but his escapee wasn't moving fast enough, was being halted every few steps with a foot in mid-air while his next barrier was painted in with proper realism. The failure was, of course, in selectivity; there was too much detail, too total a realism of background for the action to struggle through.

Now, Ted is a professional with some quantity of publication behind him, and is capable of very good work indeed. I therefore decided to do something with him which I would not have attempted with any of the others as being too extreme a criticism. Instead of discussing his exercise with him, I edited it by the method I use with my own work when the length needs trimming. Rather than try to telescope scenes into each other or eliminate incidents, which can involve very extensive rewritings, I go over the copy and erase every paragraph, sentence, clause and single word which can be removed without affecting the sense of a passage. The result is almost always a tightening of the prose and a more effective direction of the reader's understanding to precisely those things I wish him to concentrate on.

By this means I reduced Ted's exercise to about one-third of its original length (no changing of his words, mind you, only removal of the fat) and set his man running instead of merely progressing, meeting and assessing obstacles in almost subliminal flashes and surmounting them in the moment of recognition. All I did was bring to the surface what was already written into the prose, waiting to be let out.

I returned it to him without much comment, having no intention of making such a rough handling public in the workshop. Nor would I record it here save that Ted was sufficiently impressed to hand it round the others himself, which pleased me a great deal.

Cutting to essentials is a procedure which should be familiar to every writer. It is not until you have the carcass spread, so to speak, on the dissecting table with all waste removed that you know fully what you are about. Then you can judge with some accuracy how much decoration, atmosphere and side comment the work can stand. Usually, if your statements have been properly made, little addition will be necessary, and indulgent addition will be a step backwards.

This also is a point worth thinking about for future workshops.

6

I did nothing unexpected aside from these two exercises, which I think succeeded in their intention and succeeded also with the workshopppers once they caught on to the unaccustomed idea of imagination within limited parameters — so much more difficult than the ‘anything goes’ mode of creation and so much more satisfying to the intelligent reader.

Aside from some routine workshopping, my only other chore — one undertaken mainly for my private purpose of trying to uncover the literary attitudes of these people who wanted, sometimes definitely and sometimes irritatingly vaguely, to write — was the personal interview. (Whether or not Vonda and Chris conducted such private probes I did not ask; I see nothing to be gained by dithering over the methods of others while still concentrating on the rounding out of your own.) I called each of the workshopppers in for private discussion, starting on the third day, when I felt I had sufficient information for the meeting to be productive.

These sessions do not rate the privacy of the confessional, but were in a couple of cases conducted in sufficient depth to preclude any detailed report here. And there were a couple whose course was so plainly set that the meeting was a formality. Suffice it that there were two people whose manifest destinies required neither reassurance nor guidance; one whose destiny was also manifest but did need reassurance; three who will become professional writers if they are prepared to persevere despite inevitable rejections; and three more who will surely write successful stories even though they treat fiction as an occasional activity rather than one for dedication.

That leaves three, the half-handful one finds in every aspiring group, the little clique of inturnd visionaries who recognise the function of limitations in art, a determination to follow personal aims which defy workshop pinpricking, a literary style owing much to symbol and obliquity but little to syntax and clarity, and an opaque attitude to criticism which leaves one unsure whether it has been heard, let alone absorbed. They know from the beginning that their work will not be approved by the others (but are treated with a genuine interest which tends to disconcert them a little); they know better than to claim that you don’t understand what they are trying to do, but little things betray the feeling (and in fact you don’t understand well enough to take a positive stance); they do your obviously useless exercises in highly individual but obviously useless ways, produce stanzas of verse when you have asked for a story in prose and items of private literary philosophy in place of workshop criticism.

Reading their productions is the sweated-labour aspect of the job as you turn them over word by word, hoping a clue will scuttle from beneath. Occasionally it does, but in the long run you don’t know what to say to a private vision which must erupt in its own fashion. You know from experience that most of them will wear out their interest or turn to some other medium of expression, but you know also that among them is possibly the unclassifiable talent which may one day burst through

as a Lafferty or a Ballard, a Bradbury or a Cordwainer Smith. So you move quietly and carefully, aware of a possible talent obscured amid the sound and tumult of talent perverted.

The final summing up must be that the class of Monash ’77 contained six people who will be professional writers if they genuinely wish to be and six others who probably can be if they are prepared to drudge at the learning of the trade.

As for those whose dedication includes but also transcends professionalism, there were two present and a possible third. They know who they are and it is not yet my business to hold them up by name as the people to whom an *Australian* science fiction may one day be indebted. I must watch and wait and wonder (a little smugly?) if I had any significant hand in their beginnings.

Probably not.

The real writers take what they want of workshops, critics, admonitions and praises, and discard the rest without a backward glance or a thank-you. And go their way, having used you and others, sucked you dry.

Ungrateful? Graceless?

Of course.

But gratitude is the abasement of slaves, and grace should be reserved for the art rather than for its meddling missionaries.

They go their own way, and that is as it should be.

7

The \$64 question remains: Are literary workshops worthwhile?

My personal answer is yes/no with a whole slew of qualifications. Not very satisfactory.

If you ask the workshopppers was it worthwhile, the answer will surely be ‘yes’. If you ask in what way was it worthwhile you may not get such clearcut responses.

Well, what *does* the workshopper get out of it? These things:

- 1 A whale of a good time talking and fraternising with people whose cranky orientation is similar to his/her own. A sense of group belonging.
- 2 A full attention paid to his/her literary output, an attention much more understanding and sympathetic than the kind but perfunctory interest of friends and family.
- 3 A surge of communicated enthusiasm, a reinforcement of the private belief that literature is the glory of life.
- 4 A perception that other writers, including the professionals, are wholly human with faults and blind spots — that one is, after all, not a more literary minnow trying to ape a rainbow trout — that self-confidence is not only necessary but justified. (3 and 4 are probably the most important benefits as we run our workshops at present.)
- 5 Informed criticism.

That last requires qualification. The criticism given at workshops is informed, useful and mostly correct . . . It is not sufficiently informed or sufficiently useful or as far-reaching and effective as it could be.

It is amateur and superficial and deals with bits and pieces of individual stories instead of with the writer’s problems. This is inevitable, given the present-day work-

shop method whereby the moderator guides discussion but must refrain from dominating it. And of course he must not dominate; he must not appear to be the teacher of a subject whose true and personal essence cannot be taught. To a degree he is limited to letting the workshoppers have their say and doing his best (by suggestion and question) to head off obvious errors and critical dead ends.

So the dreary round of superficial comment goes on: the characterisation is flat, there's a flaw in the plotting, you've used a wrong word on page 3, the end doesn't seem right somehow, the bit where the robot's head falls off is ambiguous, no sensible girl would have fallen for that line, if the alien had sucker-discs it wouldn't have been able to use the typewriter, and so on.

All these criticisms are usually accurate and need to be made if the details of the story are to be set right — which is equivalent to sweeping the rubbish under the carpet. The story will still be a failure because no one has had the literary experience to perceive that the trouble is not in the details but in the overall conception, in the writer himself rather than the work, and that it is his total understanding of his craft that requires bolstering.

Meanwhile the moderator would dearly love to bel- low just once, 'Can none of you so-and-sos see that the twit has got halfway through the story, realised his plot won't work and gerrymandered a fake ending rather than rewrite that scene on page 2 that he's so proud of?'

He daren't do it. Within minutes he would be swim- ming in the murky depths of symmetry, balance, artistic integrity, symbolic parallels, thematic continuity and God wot, while the stonemason workshoppers waited politely for him to drown — and let them get with their happy nitpicking.

It seems to me that somehow we must try to introduce the basic concepts of criticism; we must get round to discussion of theme and plot, background and fore- ground, the uses of such techniques as first-person narrative and internal monologue and all the other tricks of apparatus that seem so simple but aren't and, above all, characterisation.

The last has always been the bugbear of SF and only in recent years have a few satisfactory solutions to its problems begun to appear. And how can you achieve useful criticism from people who are (for the most part) almost certainly unaware that there are half a dozen basic characterisation techniques available and that these can be fused and manipulated into hundreds of individual methods, that character grows from within the story instead of being imposed upon it, or even that there is a vast difference between characterisation and a list of personal traits?

Our workshoppers are neither unintelligent nor pig ignorant — far otherwise — but we must not expect

them (particularly the younger ones) to come equipped with the weapons whose use has taken the rest of us a lifetime to learn. We should take the opportunity to lead young writers right into the deep waters they must eventually navigate.

I see no reason why in the second week (by the end of the first week they will have mastered basic workshop technique and, as experience showed, be ready for new things) moderators should not broach these subjects in order to lead to deeper understanding of the real in- stead of the superficial problems of their fellow writers — and of themselves.

Lecturing is regarded as anathema at workshops, but this, like all other stock attitudes, should be periodically reconsidered to see if it has outlasted its usefulness. I feel that a fifteen-minute lecturette followed by a free- for-all discussion of the points made could inculcate a damned sight more of the basic facts of fiction writing than a dozen workshoppings. (The Melbourne Nova Mob uses this form successfully in literary discussion.) Didacticism must, of course, be avoided as the plague; every writer must feel totally free to accept or reject, so long as he recognises the existence of the depths of the subject.

Following this, by the middle of the third week (assuming three weeks as a minimum useful course) criticism in depth should be possible; *not* criticism of individual stories but of the writer himself as revealed in the sum of his work presented during the course. By this time his attitudes and approaches, insightfulness and blind spots, technical weaknesses and verbal habits, constructive and evocative strengths and ability to organise his material should be familiar to everyone present, with perceptions deepened by the critical con- siderations opened up in the second week. Such discus- sion of the *generality* of a writer's work, as distinct from simple correctable details, should send him home with a far more comprehensive view of the business of litera- ture and of his problems within it than he can possibly achieve under the present method. He may well have discovered not only what he did wrong but how and why he did it and where within himself the capacity for betterment lies.

(With underhand cunning I omit discussion of the selection of suitable moderators. That could be a head- ache for someone. Kitty Vigo, perhaps?)

I am well aware that what I suggest is open to contro- versy. So what? There are still people prepared to prove that the Earth is flat.

I am also aware of the difficulties of personnel selec- tion, and for the moderators in preparation and pres- entation. But life wasn't meant to be easy, was it, Mal?

— *SF Commentary* 52, April 1977

Glimpses of the great:

Seacon (World Convention, Brighton) and Glasgow, 1979

I
Nobody tells the truth about himself. For one thing, nobody knows the truth of himself; for another, when he fancies he does, he'd usually rather you didn't. (Militant feminists, please note my arrogant use of the distributive pronoun to cover both sexes; I won't put up with anything more cumbersome.) This is why it is a waste of time rushing your favourite author at conventions and book signings; the only thing you will learn of him is that he is quite different from your preconception. The more successful he is and the more subject to public exposure, the blander will be the skin drawn over his personality. He loves your adulation but loathes your probing, and after three days of a fan bash like Seacon he is more apt to run for cover than paste on the public grin for the thousandth time.

The public persona is all you will meet. Only his friends know him in any worthwhile sense. You won't meet *them* because he'll make damned sure you don't; he needs his privacy. You wouldn't bother with them, anyway; they aren't other famous writers but tradesmen and bank clerks and counterhands and so on, like yourself.

So I can't say I really met any of the famous at Seacon, but I saw a lot of them. Two I sought out deliberately in order to confirm or dispel prior impressions; one and one only I sought because we had something to say to each other; the rest I encountered by chance.

I had barely wandered into the lobby on the opening morning when someone screamed my name ('Somebody actually knows me!') and Cherry Wilder came battleshipping through the throng in one of those comfortable caftans that make small girls look formidable and big girls Amazonian. We swapped compliments on *Brin's Five* and *Beloved Son*. (You do that automatically, getting it out of the way so that conversation can begin.) But in this case, conversation was aborted as behind us a lift door opened and a glittering stream of the great decanted itself into the lobby.

Brian Aldiss paused for greetings and Margaret Aldiss unexpectedly remembered me from a ten-minute meeting in 1976. Bob Silverberg fixed me with an eye somewhere between tolerant and frosty and said, 'Hello, George.' Malcolm Edwards was introduced, together with a couple I can't remember — faces begin to run into each other as the con progresses — and Chris Priest passed almost unrecognised until I realised who it was under the almost-short-back-and-sides. Instead of something intelligent, I said, 'You've had your hair cut', while thinking along the lines of *it changes one's impression of your personality completely*. Which it does. He said, 'Yes', meaning *Oh, Christ, again!* and like a stammering yokel (I suppose we all get these bumbling fits at times) I

carried on with, 'It suits you', to which he replied, looking down from his towering eight-feet-three, 'It doesn't make a subject for conversation!' and passed on. I didn't see him again.

First Australian wicket down for Nil — Caught and Bowled, Self.

I saw few of the SF lions more than once, and then usually by accident, but Cherry was always somewhere around when needed. She introduced me to her husband, Horst Grimm, who turned out to be the single most charming new acquaintance I made there; we talked quite a bit about Australia and Germany when he wasn't shepherding two small daughters with insatiable appetites for horror films.

Cherry's fictional interest in the drama has its practical aspects also. When we were dressing for the Masquerade I decided, having glanced at the stage lighting, that no makeup was necessary, but Cherry took one look at my face and said, 'A thin line of 5 to outline the lips, dear', so I tried it. She was right, of course; it gave a focus to the tight contouring of the hood. We should have talked theatre but somehow didn't. We didn't talk writers' shop either.

The only person with whom I talked shop to any extent was Tom Disch. I really wanted to meet him, since he had written a very appreciative letter to *SF Commentary* on my review of his *334*, which is one of the most shamefully neglected novels in the SF canon.

I went to the apartment of my Pocket Books publisher, David Hartwell, whom I wished to see on business, and the first person I saw was Tom Disch, standing very removed and alone in a corner of a roomful of delirious drunks (it was about 11.30 p.m.). I was with Peter Nicholls and demanded an introduction.

Disch remembered me from the review and was very warm and welcoming until he had a rush of suspicion to the head and complained, 'But you don't have Australian accents, either of you!' Peter has almost lost his, but I calmed him with a burst of home-grown Fitzroy-Port Melbourne. (Actually, he shuddered.) He probably didn't understand a word, but accepted it as proof of provenance.

Then we nattered until Malcolm Edwards rolled by, together with a malevolent-looking lass (wife? girlfriend? I didn't know) who was painfully fed up with the grog-and-noise scene. And I don't blame her.

Malcolm swayed like a reed in the thick air and announced that he was not drunk. With my usual tact I said, 'Malcolm, you are', and caught from the lass a glance of the power that withers dragons. Then he invited me to participate on a panel on Day 3. There seemed to be already a platoon of Big Names on it, so I

assumed it was a grab-bag session designed to use up all who might be insulted if passed over, but I said 'Yes', and he swayed off into the screaming hell of writers, fans and publisher's agents.

I ploughed off in search of David Hartwell, who said 'Hullo' and 'We must have a talk', and vanished under a flood of supplicants scrambling for his editorial ear. Don't let anybody tell you your dignified writer-heroes are above that sort of toadying; they fight for position like starving wolves in an abattoir. We never did have the talk, or even see each other again. That seems about par for a convention course.

I think it was on Day 2 that I had a particularly unsettling experience. It was, I suppose, nothing much, and perhaps you need to be a writer to catch the impact of it.

John Brunner was speaking in the main hall and I dropped in to listen because I have always found his non-fiction commentaries more relevant and down to earth than his fiction. When I entered he was complaining that science fiction had fallen into the hands of literary barbarians.

I was approving this sentiment — with the rider that he was one of the more pretentious barbarians — when he flourished a copy of *Foundation* 17 and read, with relish and gusto, an extract concerning writers 'lacking in the understanding of politics, economics, scientific activity and depth . . .'

As he spoke the words, he turned at the lectern and looked directly into my eyes. It was an accident, of course; we have never met and he wouldn't have known me from Adam. But — the quotation was from Couze Venn's review of *Beloved Son*. It left a sour taste.

Well after a quarter of a century on the battlefield, I don't let reviewers get under my skin (three good screaming fits and it's all over) and that particular review — an irritatingly condescending job by an Oxford don, containing a number of factual errors — had not bothered me overmuch until it was arrowed straight at my head in such a fashion.

To this day I have not been able to make up my mind whether or not the criticism was just.

Another Oxford don on the program was Tom Shippey, held up to me by Brian Aldiss during a panel at Unicon IV as a critic to be admired. It so happened that I didn't admire him then and don't now — as a critic. But if Aldiss, who is no slouch at separating wheat from chaff, recommends a man, it would be foolish to pass him over.

So I listened to a faultless dissertation, entertainingly delivered, which succeeded in irritating me profoundly by doing something it didn't intend as well as what it did. What Shippey spoke of was the attitudes of science fiction writers towards technology, an important and useful theme, but —

— the samples he chose to illustrate his thesis were three totally forgettable and unimportant novels by Poul Anderson, Larry Niven and Bob Shaw. (I recall that the Anderson book was *Shield*, a potboiler of the sixties.) The general effect, one I am sure Shippey did not recognise, was to suggest that these samples of adventure-opera were consciously intended by their authors as serious attacks on a philosophic problem, when indeed they are only twice-told tales using the standard SF

outcomes of standard SF formulations.

This effect, however unintentional, of assuring listeners that certain junk SF is really the repository of deep and serious philosophic questioning, is one of the critical falsehoods that inclines really high-powered literary criticism to give the field a wide berth. Love your space opera, by all means, but don't treat it as though it were something more intellectual than simple escapist fare.

To one who followed Shippey's argument with an eye deliberately closed to the shoddiness of his examples, something useful was being said about SF *writers*. It was to a writing seminar that it needed saying.

Still, Shippey on his own ground *is* good, even if he didn't care for *Beloved Son*. (He didn't.)

There was a panel during which Norman Spinrad (who still manages quite irrationally to look twenty-five) made bitter complaint against the main hall sound system. We in the audience couldn't make out what was wrong, but I was shortly to find out for myself.

The panel for which Malcolm Edwards had shanghaied me was about — well, what? I had forgotten. Just another dissipated wreck, you see.

Tom Shippey had just finished speaking and was still shuffling his notes at the lectern when I asked Malcolm what the hell we were supposed to talk about. It seemed to be something concerning the uses of imagination in SF, and I said, 'Good God!', which sent Shippey into a spasm of immoderate amusement while I had a spasm of acute intellectual indigestion.

However, there is a reasonably safe *modus operandi* when you haven't an idea in your head: listen to the other speakers, then either argue with or elaborate on their statements. It will stagger you through when all else fails.

In this case the first speaker was Tom Disch, seated next to me. He said almost exactly what I might have said in a more collected moment, said it better, and said it completely. Nothing for me there. Fortunately, the moderator switched to the other end of the table, where a feminist redoubt of Vonda McIntyre, Marion Zimmer Bradley and (I think) Chelsea Quinn Yarbro grabbed the ball and ran with it for fifteen minutes — and I couldn't hear a word.

That had been Spinrad's complaint. The sound in the audience sector was perfect, but over the stage there brooded an appalling triple echo, with the result that though we each had a microphone we couldn't make sense of any but the person right next to us.

When my turn came I simply hadn't heard ninety per cent of the argument. I don't recall much of what I said, beyond stating a preference for controlled rather than capriciously fantastic imagining; for all I knew I might have been simply hacking at ideas already used by the other speakers. But nobody booed or left the hall, and Mervyn Binns said afterwards that I was the only one who said anything he could understand.

Make what you like of that, but a big moment was at hand.

While we stood at the foot of the stage steps, refighting the battle, a stocky, no-nonsense type in a business suit shouldered his way through the pack, grabbed my hand and announced himself pleased to make my acquaintance.

Arthur C. Clarke, no less, seeking me out instead of the other way about. Perhaps he liked what I had said on the panel. I never found out. We got bogged down in trying to make sense of a literary contact we couldn't remember, and so another exchange of immortal wisdom never eventuated.

Perhaps he thought I was somebody else.

So, as that man kept saying every time he bumped off another character, it goes.

I ran into Terry Carr somewhere or other; I think it was in a cafe. He said, 'You know, you speak exactly the way you write — all Germanic roots and very few Latinisms.'

That was mildly paralysing for a bit of Cafe Society chit-chat, and not unlike being told you have a bricklayer's hands when you have always secretly admired their slender grace.

I muttered something mock-cheerful about never writing another word without checking its etymology, and he assured me with the evil gaiety of a brat who has just kicked over an ant's nest that 'That's the sort of thing you get told at conventions.'

Yes, isn't it.

I *still* think he's a nice bloke.

There was a person infesting the lounges with a sort of wind-powered hand-piano (not quite an accordion) and a sign round his neck reading, 'Filthy Pierre'. One is inclined to believe it.

I was sitting contemplating him — as a zoo specimen — while he played and sang, interminably, 'The Red Flag' to a dull-eyed audience of non-revolutionaries, when a young man shoved an autograph book under my nose and demanded in an uncompromising Glasgow accent that I sign it.

Since I had discovered early in the piece that British fans had never heard of me (Americans mysteriously had) I suggested that he took me for somebody else. It turned out that he just thought that 'I looked like a writer' and didn't want to miss out if I was. (What do writers look like?)

So I signed his book and he hid his disappointment manfully but gave me the address of the meeting place of his Glasgow fan club, because I was bound for Scotland after the Convention.

The club is called The Friends of Kilgore Trout. I feared the worst.

Alfred Bester has in the past appealed to me with the high-flying, bright purple, logicless onrush of his mile-a-second thrillers and because his occasional essays reveal him as one of those who were never fooled by the Campbell mystique. (Curious how the Campbell legend is beginning to decay now that his writers no longer fear ostracism from the pages of *Analog* if they tell the truth.) So, when a Bester session appeared on the main hall listings, I went along, curious to observe the man underneath the adulation.

He began his hour by insisting that all the microphones be shut off. I wondered did he have an authentic parade-ground voice or did he intend simply to scream at the fans.

His voice doesn't carry at all. He screamed. Ineffectually.

He rampaged up and down the centre aisle, demanding questions. 'Ask me anything, anything at all! Not goddamn silly things — sensible questions! Whatever you want to know, I can tell you!'

It was as shameless a piece of cult-of-self selling as I have seen in many a year, but it didn't come off in the voice-killing reaches of the main hall under its forty-foot-high ceiling. The fans couldn't hear his demands and he couldn't hear their questions.

I stood three minutes of it and left, for once disappointed in a man I would have preferred to admire.

Very different were the performances of the two Guests of Honour in their speeches.

Aldiss was completely professional. He gave what was essentially the same speech we heard in Melbourne at Unicon IV, with a different barrage of jokes at the beginning. I liked the one about the Irish surgical team who performed the world's first haemorrhoid transplant. The story of his search for his old house in Sumatra (I think it was Sumatra) had been polished and pointed in the meantime and now came over more meaningfully.

Men like Aldiss, who are called on to produce a routine too often for comfort must, in sheer self-defence, develop some such all-purpose address for general consumption, and this one is nicely calculated to preserve the literary image while adding to it a fistful of personal touches which hook the fans without compromising the auctorial aura. A model of its kind. I'd like to think I could do it as well but know that I couldn't.

Another fully professional, practised address was that of the amusing but shallow Frederik Pohl. On the other hand the quiet Harry Stubbs (Hal Clement), speaking off the cuff, was endearing in his attempt to be both honest and informative, and spoke far more interestingly than you might expect from his ponderous writing style.

Fritz Leiber, the Overseas GoH, was a peculiar case, different from all the others.

He is an extremely tall man, very spare and lean, with quite beautiful silver hair and the benign expression of somebody's favourite uncle, not at all the picture of exotic evil you might conjure as the creator of the Grey Mouser and his enemies. He has also the largest pair of feet I have seen on a human being; I couldn't tear my eyes from those gigantic shoes.

Age is catching up with Fritz and his health is less than stable.

He has always been an uneven writer, capable of occasional beauties, sly subtleties and arresting ideas (remember 'A Pail of Air' and 'Coming Attraction'?) as well as the crass ineptitude of the 'heroic verse' trimeters of *The Big Time*. His speech seemed to echo all of this.

He spoke of his family stage history (Shakespearian), of his early days of science fiction and fantasy, and then of his personal philosophy, which seemed gentle and wispy and redolent of an earlier day.

He has the charm that seemed so lacking in most of the other professionals, though not in all — Norman Spinrad exhibited a lively goodwill and Jack Williamson roamed about in an aura of quiet pleasantness.

I told Jack I remembered reading his first short, 'The

Metal Man', in *Amazing* back in our salad days. To which he responded, 'For heaven's sake, how old are you?'

In his seventies now, he was a teenager when he wrote the story, as were many of the well-known names of the day. He is a gentle, nice bloke to talk to.

On the whole, the American writers seemed to me more relaxed and approachable than their English counterparts. I recall that Brian Stableford offered a frosty 'How do you do?' when I was introduced to him and at once retired from the conversation. Is it possible that he remembered some of my published comments on his work?

Maybe, maybe not.

In any case, it's no good getting aggrieved over another's opinion; if it were, John Foyster's victims would have seen him hanged, poisoned, disembowelled, impaled, drawn and quartered years ago, while many a Lupoff or Thorogood would not have lived through his teens.

Sprague de Camp is an impressive man and a good speaker. He gave a talk on 'Conan' Howard, a literary nonentity of whom he has researched a comprehensive biography. (Yet people who matter are dismissed with a brief newspaper notice.)

A questioner in the audience asked was Howard homosexual. I thought it a reasonable question because, in a brief encounter with a couple of Conan stories I had been disturbed by a sexual quality in the writer's loving attention to muscle and virility symbols. De Camp answered that he had no reason to think so, but that there was evidence of mother-domination and sexual repression. A fair response.

For the rest of the session I ruminated quietly on the sexual writhings of the teenagers — and the not-so-teenaged — who dote on these virility fantasies and their imitators and, worse still, on the anatomically hilarious muscle-monsters depicted in what is offered as 'fantasy art'. That is much more worth discussing than the emotionally stunted Howard. But the fans would have hated it.

Nobody wants truth at a science fiction convention.

The fans get a psychological fix.

Science fiction gets nothing.

Do you wonder the press laughs?

II

After days of bobbing like a cork on a stream of several thousand fans and never seeing or hearing anything or anybody properly, I broke for the railway station and woke next morning in homely old Glasgow, thinking that I have now survived two World SF Conventions and won't feel my life wasted if I never attend another.

On the Thursday night I embarked on the Journey Perilous via Glasgow's bus system, whose secrets of route and timing are not adjusted to crude Ocker under-

standing, but eventually arrived at the Wintersgill Bar. I had already forgotten the name of my Glaswegian auto-graph hound but entered the bar, demanded a foreign brand of beer which I hoped wouldn't raise my scalp and cased the joint for anything that might be a group of science fiction fans.

Nothing.

I would have to ask.

Tell me: how would you feel about asking a strange barman in a strange bar in a strange land, 'Do you know the Friends of Kilgore Trout?'

I girded my loins and asked.

Not only the barman but practically everyone within earshot clattered in with something on the lines of 'Och ay, but ye maun gang 'cross the passage tae the ither bar, laddie! It's there y'll find y' wee freends!'

For Glasgow that's unusually comprehensible. What's more, everyone knew the FOKT and found nothing peculiar in their doings. Whatever another Scot does is by definition respectable, sensible and to be approved; only foreigners are suspect and semi-demented.

So I found the FOKT, but my contact was not present, and a pleasant young bloke introduced himself as 'Bob-Shaw-but-not-that-Bob-Shaw', which seems to be how he is referred to throughout British fandom. He is the FOKT secretary.

A gang of eight or ten was gathered about a large table, socking into the grog, and he introduced me round. Nobody seemed to find an invading Australian particularly menacing. (In London, you sometimes feel there have been unobtrusive orders to fill the moat and raise the drawbridge.) They were more or less what you would find in any Australian fan group — mostly young, with a couple of older ones, mostly working types, with a couple of students and the inevitable big and jolly girl (what the Scots term a 'sonsy lass'), of whom there is one surely in every fan group in the world.

We passed a couple of pleasant hours getting mildly pissed.

Bob seemed determined that I should return in 1980 for a convention he is planning, and I carefully wrote everything down. But that was then, and God knows where the notes are now.

It seems there is an opposition group, centred on Edinburgh, who are determined that FOKT shall not run this coveted convention. No blood has yet been spilt, but I had the impression that the next pibroch might be a call to arms. I described the situation between Melbourne and Sydney and was understood at once; that was it, exactly!

If you are ever in Glasgow, look them up.

For the first time since Seacon began I felt at home and relaxed, enjoying a beer among real people.

— John Foyster's *Chunder!*, January 1980

George Tells A Bit About Himself

Home sweet home:

How I met Melba

We were busy getting pie-eyed, which is nothing unusual, at Bruce Gillespie's place — which is distinctly unusual. Not that Bruce is anti-anything, but he publishes so much that he rarely has time to drink tea, let alone exotic alcohols.

At any rate John Bangsund, who dotes on exotic alcohols, flashed this sheet that he claimed would one day be the cover of *Scythrop* 28. There could be no mistaking the identity of the woman trying to look demure (which she never was in life) in her get-up for some tatty opera (because even the best opera was tatty in her day) and I could only conclude that John had succumbed to the dreaded Canberra Rot. (And who can be sure he hasn't?)

I asked gently, 'But why Melba?' and he answered, with that peculiar lack of logic that goes down so well with children, idiots and George Turner that 'it seemed a good idea at the time'.

And he added, because he doesn't know when to stop, 'I thought you might do an article about it.'

It's the type of impertinence that can only be capped by a greater. I delivered my body blow with studied nonchalance. 'Frankly,' I told him, 'there have been singers whom I much preferred as artists, but she was a most pleasant person to meet.'

It stopped him cold. He had never before realised just who my true contemporaries were. (Until that moment I hadn't quite realised it myself.) Never did a name-dropper savour his art more sweetly.

'You mean you *knew* Melba!' Reverence throbbed in that claret-cosseted voice. I couldn't have made much more impression by claiming to have wolf-whistled Lizzie Borden. It's the unexpectedness that stuns them.

Yes, I knew Melba. (It's the sort of statement that might be described as almost, slightly or minimally true. The facts will appear later.)

Having no desire to write such a fatuous piece for his spasmodic rag (I have been looking for an adjective for *Scythrop* for months — Eureka!) I pressed advantage, with just the right touch of coolness, what he fondly imagined might be the connection between Melba and SF.

For a moment I had him on the rails but he's resilient, by God, he's resilient.

Murmuring, 'I'm sure you'll think of one', he flipped glass to lip with an insolent flourish, engulfed an indecent plug of claret and started talking to someone else before I could lay tongue to suitable curse.

This historical introduction was included to give you some insight into the real personality of Bangsund and of the kind of infighting demanded if you are to survive under his tyranny. More than simple one-up-manship is required against a man who is not ashamed to hit and run — with his claret in one hand and your scalp in the other.

When that I was and a little tiny boy,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain . . .

That's when I met Melba, but I don't think it was raining.

It was all because I was a choirboy at the time, and every year we used to . . .

To hell with that. Let me tell you about that time in St Paul's choir. It was nearly half a century ago, and Dame Nellie can wait in the wings a paragraph or two longer . . .

. . . because I have been looking at some other illustrations for this projected *Scythrop* 28, and my time machine has jerked to a fragmented halt in several different periods at once.

There's Ned Kelly, of course, in his tinware, but he shuffled on his immortal coil in 1892 (I think) and I did not actually know him. (Nor was I present at the death of Queen Anne, rumour to the contrary. I have to explain these things because part of JB's reaction to my casual mention of Melba-meeting was an unspoken, 'Jesus, you must be ancient!' Like the unfulfilled teenager he is.)

But above and to the right of Ned is a group of ladies and gents who are also a little before my time. However, fashion changed less rapidly and less thoroughly in the sprawling, self-contained back country just after World War I, and those folk (including the brat in sailor suit) would not have been out of place in my Kalgoorlie of 1920.

Not for them the 'roaring twenties' bit. That came much later — so much later that I have a distinct memory of shock when my mother cut her waist-length hair and wore a 'shingle' in 1926 and got her skirts up off the ground at about the same time. It was like having a stranger in the house. And a year or so later, the other kids and I were giggling at skirts that had climbed to the knee. And a musical comedy called *Good News* was all the rage, with its hit song, 'Roll 'Em Girls', encouraging the naughtiness of rolling the stockings actually *below* the knee and showing the (porn! shudder!) dimpled flesh.

And there's this picture of the Exhibition Building,



SCYTHROP 28

a vast white elephant built for something or other (perhaps to celebrate the end of the Wars of the Roses, also just before my time) and notable in my tiny eleven-year-old mind because it had (may still have, for all I know) a vast pipe organ, many of whose notes did not play.

One of the reasons for this non-playing was that the angels of St Paul's Cathedral choir — some twenty other little bastards and myself — got loose among the pipes one day while officially giving a concert of Christmas carols and souvenired some forty or fifty reeds. There's really nothing like the simple-hearted vandalism of the leering innocent.

I was about to tell of the choir, but hang on a minute because there's a picture of a cable tram, and riding cable trams was one of the pleasures of the twenties. Ah, to sit at the front, with the wind blowing crisp in your face! Also rain, dust, hail and kicked-up road dirt.

But in fact there was a sort of camaraderie, now quite dead, about public transport in those days. It was part of the fun when the gripman ('driver' to you) failed to 'shoot' the corner when changing grip from one cable to the next at right angles to it, and we all had to pile out and push her round. And you didn't pant with despair when your last tram departed without you; you just ran like mad, caught it up in about half a block and were dragged aboard by whistling, cat-calling, encouraging passengers.

But about this choir . . .

Aside from a musical education of a sort — under the tutorship of Dr A. E. Floyd, one of the few people I have ever genuinely respected — the choir provided what passed for a secular education. And a grim proposition that was.

Choir practice lasted till about nine each morning, then we went off to East Melbourne to start school at ten. Since we had to be back and ready dressed for evensong at five, this meant no more than five hours' schooling each day, and often less.

The school itself was a hall in a back lane — it still exists, though the choirboys are nowadays educated at Trinity — and here the score or so of us were handled by two masters. Since our ages ranged from eight to about thirteen (few boy's voices last unbroken after that), these two poor devils had to run five or six classes simultaneously. In fact, it was the one-horse country school system — in the heart of a city of a million people.

But with a difference, in that the curriculum was classical. This meant that though arithmetic was not

actively discouraged, we wallowed mainly in history (and bloody peculiar history it was — King Alfred's trouble with cakes, and all that), geography (the principal exports of Tierra del Fuego are . . . well, what are they? . . . that sort of geography) and English (Charles Lamb's 'Origin of Roast Pig' was a fair sample, and remains one of my childhood delights).

And — to make a full man — Latin! At the ripe (meaning grubby and probably smelly) age of eight I was introduced to a volume whose first stark sentence remains with me yet — 'Nauta casam habet.'

First declension.

That sailor and his bloody cottage haunted me for years, if only because it seemed a stupid remark that the Latin grammar made no effort to explain.

We bulldozed through the declensions by reciting examples in unison at the tops of our voices in a thumping rhythm — 'Bellum, bellum, bellum, bellum, bello, bello' — pause to mark end of singulars, then hurtle into the plurals — 'bella, bella, bella, bellorum, bellis, bellis.' It didn't do much good, and to this day I can be reduced to gibbering confusion by contemplation of the ablative absolute. I never knew what it was, don't know now, and in some sort of paranoid defensiveness flatly refuse to find out.

If I never became more than a toe-in-the-door Latin scholar, at least I learned something about the basis of language — *all* language, not only languages — and much more when I came to French and German. I have an uneasy feeling that the direction of my intellectual life (if that be a fitting phrase for mental lucky-dippiness) was settled in that beastly, draughty, miserable hall of resounding ignorance.

But the real hell of choir-school life was contained in those immortal weeklies, *The Magnet* and *Nelson Lee*, which chronicled the outrageous doings of a set of snotty little snobs at English schools called Greyfriars and St Frank's. They were modelled roughly (and despite their air of bonhomie) on the Rugby of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, and we, for reasons known only to God and his soulmate Satan, copied them.

Newcomers became 'fags' and were subjected to indignities, sometimes both painful and terrifying. Among them was isolation on a deserted landing on one of the numerous little-used back stairs of the Cathedral, there to await the dreaded ghost of the Ginger Cat. (The name was not a joke — it was considered specially horrifying.) The sadistic side of memory still dwells occasionally on the rending screams of an eight-year-old who survived our pleasantries to become a remarkably successful and brutal Commando officer, and I wonder if we had some part in the forming of his career.

Of course there was compulsory sport, singularly devoted to drawing blood and tears and making a man of you, and uninhibited bullying of the small by the large. I was small.

Eventually I was expelled over a matter concerning dead fish thrown down a lift well, which is too long a tale to dwell on here; suffice it that I escaped to a wider air and went to a State School. There they introduced me, tearfully complaining, to such unheard-of subjects as Geometry, elementary Physics and Shakespeare. Probably just in time to avert utter darkness.

All I carried with me from St Paul's was a phoney

English accent which took me thirty years to lose. One side effect was a passion for Handel, Haydn, Bach, Mendelssohn and Mozart which has not subsided. But the early impact of those giants had a stultifying effect, in that only now am I able to come to terms with such as Prokofiev, Ravel, Debussy and Stravinsky. Schönberg, Hindemith and Bartok are, I fear, forever beyond me.

Does Melba lurk somewhere in all this? Yes; here she is:

Every Christmas the choir did its charitable round of the public hospitals, singing carols for patients who dutifully expressed themselves delighted, and possibly were, because it was a very fine choir.

Once, in the midst of this festive bawling of 'Wenceslas', 'God Rest Ye', 'In Dulce Jubilo', etc. we found ourselves at Coombe Cottage (a fair-sized cottage, believe you me) at Lilydale, delivering our soprano goods to its owner, Dame Nellie no less. And afterwards she came and talked to us, so that forever we could claim that We Met Melba. She probably sang 'Home Sweet Home' as a *quid pro quo*, because she would sing the damned thing at the drop of a hat, but memory doesn't really record that.

Her secretary then was a willowy young gent called Beverly Nichols, who later achieved a sort of giggly notoriety as the author of a series of ladylike books called *Down the Garden Path* and similar titles and a set of marvellously bitchy essays on prominent people, *Are They the Same at Home?*

Perhaps he was there. If so, he didn't register, but Beverly is worth a memory as an oddity of modern literature. (If you want to discover the Nichols style without wading through one of his moribund books, read Graham Greene's incredibly funny pastiche, 'Portrait of a Maiden Lady', in the Penguin edition of Greene's *Collected Essays*. It's a miracle of hilariously spot-on nastiness.)

And where does SF get in?

It gets in here, before I forget.

And by the skin of its teeth only.

The best I can do is point out that a snivelling, inky choirboy who lived — God save the word — in the Era of Melba made existence supportable by adventuring vicariously among BEMs and spaceships supplied by a cavern of glories called McGill's Bookshop.

The Skylark of Space was king of the universe then, and I soared abroad with Seaton and DuQuesne while my tinny soprano quavered 'Oh, for the wings of a dove', which was a pretty poor substitute.

The great-greats of that day were people like Hyatt Verrill, David Keller and Stanton Coblentz; Leinster and Hamilton were old-timers in the business even then (they must have been born in the Pleistocene, a year or two before me), and Jack Williamson was reaching chubby fingers at his first typewriter. They were great days, when adventure and wonder and exhilaration and colour and a crawling at the nape of the neck were all part of the indescribable escape into romance.

Consistency, scientific accuracy, the canons of criticism and even plain common sense had not arisen to plague appreciation and fragment enjoyment. I look back on those days like one who has kicked a particularly technicolored drug habit — glad to be no longer in total

thrall, but nostalgic for the marvellous dreams.

Alas, this slobbering over yesterday must wind down with a rather nasty twist in the tail of memory. Quite a peculiar twist, with a moral attached, saying, 'Put not your trust in authors and those whose provenance is romance.'

You see, some twenty-five years ago, while my mother (a grim lady with a positively badgering regard for truth) still lived, we spoke of Melba. Now, it's a curious thing that my mother and I, who rarely agreed on anything more serious than a craving for chocolate, cordially disliked the great goddess's singing, finding it perfect in technique but lacking in human warmth, just as neither of us liked the bull-bellowings of Caruso despite their glory of tone. We preferred lesser titans who moved our hearts more than our clinical appreciation.

We were probably talking along such lines when I recalled the Coombe Cottage meeting.

And here I assume the novelist's privilege of recreating a lost conversation . . .

My mother put down her teacup, set her face in the sympathetic expression she wore when about to enjoy shredding someone else's dream, and said:

'You have been rattling that nonsense for twenty years. But now you have achieved a species of maturity, fighting for your country and that sort of thing . . .' Here she raised a minatory finger to interpose, 'Now, now, I do not wish to hear again your diatribe on the juvenility of patriotism. You do it well, but enough is enough. In fact, you're a bore. Where was I?'

'Melba.'

'Why? Ah, yes, I was saying that this fantasy has run uncontradicted for twenty years, but it is time to quash it. You did not meet Melba at Coombe Cottage. You did not even visit Coombe Cottage.'

'I remember well . . .'

'You do not.'

In the face of such authority it always paid to shut up and listen.

'The choir was supposed to visit Coombe Cottage but the visit was cancelled. Why you should have built this edifice of nonsense on a minor disappointment, if it was indeed that, is beyond me. But you were always an *imaginative* child. Unhealthily so, I often thought.'

She raised her teacup, signifying termination of the subject, then set it down again, indicating that a coda was coming.

'But you did meet her once. But you wouldn't remember; you were only three. It was at your Aunt's place.' ('Aunt', be it noted, was 'society', and could have Melba along home any old day.) 'Melba kissed you, I can't think why. She had such good taste in other matters. You burst into tears and would not be pacified and had to be taken out, purple in the face.'

So much for the glamorous past.

It leaves me wondering uncomfortably just what did or did not happen in those olden days. Or even last week . . .

— John Bangsund's *Scythrop* 28, Summer 1973–74

THE LAST INTERVIEW

Judith Buckrich

in conversation with

George Turner

This conversation took place on the eve of George Turner's seventy-eighth birthday, at Turner's home in Ballarat. I was asked by the editors of *Eidolon* to interview Turner in September 1994, well into the third year of my work on his biography [*George Turner: A Life*, Melbourne University Press, 1999]. We found it difficult to stick to the 'interview' framework; our association has been based on many 'interviews' towards the biography and on correspondence. During the course of time we have become friends and developed the habits of conversation that always go beyond the bounds of interview; we find it difficult to stick to 'the point', thus the result is a conversation, and not an interview.

My brief from *Eidolon* was to talk mainly about Turner's last four books, *The Sea and Summer* (Drowning Towers in the US), *Brain Child*, *The Destiny Makers* and *Genetic Soldier*, and about science fiction in general. We began by talking about *The Sea and Summer*.

Let's begin with The Sea and Summer. What were your motivations for writing it?

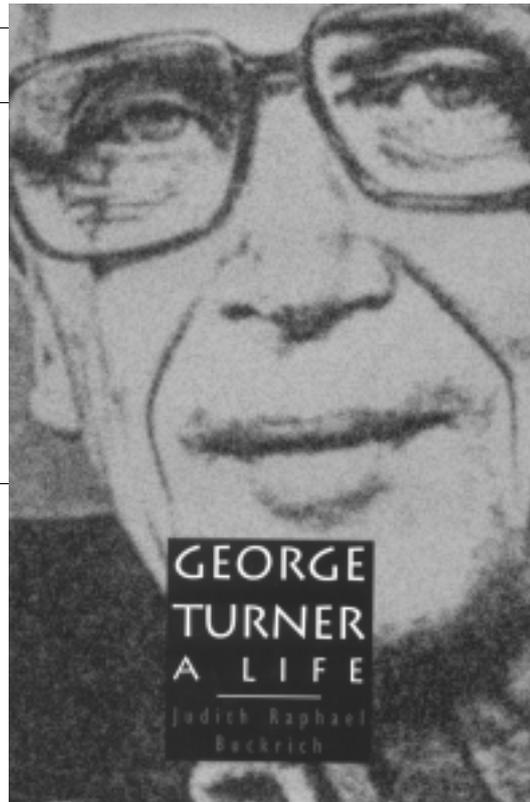
I wanted to write a science fiction book in the mainstream form — concentrating on people and events. And about the greenhouse effect, but about how it could affect people, not the environment.

Aren't you one of those science fiction writers who always write about people?

To a great extent, but in this case I wanted to write a novel that would not depend upon science for its effect. There were people in a situation (in *The Sea and Summer*) and they had to behave as their situation drove them. Nothing to do with being driven by new inventions or anything of that sort.

One of your other great interests is population. You've spoken at conferences about it; you've written about it. Do you see the kind of problems that appear in The Sea and Summer around you already?

Not in Australia. But in other parts of the world. For instance, in the situation in Africa, with all the tribes fighting in central Africa in particular. I think that a lot of that is driven by overpopulation. They're clearing the



jungle. The same is true in South America, particularly in Brazil, where the natives are being practically deprived of their living. In fact they're moving into the cities because their jungle living has been destroyed. They've got nothing to eat unless they move into cities.

You always write about people in cities, apart from in Genetic Soldier, where there are no cities left. Don't you see any impact, even in a city like Melbourne?

Melbourne, or any big city, provides me with things that I can look at and I can say, *yes, well that won't last, or this has got to be changed*; things of that sort. For instance, the towers in *The Sea and Summer* are the direct outcome of bankrupt government and automation. Of course we haven't even seen the beginning of automation yet.

Do you think there's going to be a lot more?

Oho, we think we've got ten per cent of people out of work and that's bad. I think it will go to forty and fifty before we're through.

Do you think that in your following three books, your science fiction has continued to be people-driven?

Once I've got the general idea of background, the characters are the main consideration. Particularly the main characters: they have to be set even before I start writing.

What do you mean: they have to be set?

They have to be a physical and mental type and I have to have some idea of their philosophical orientation; what kind of people they are. And from then on they

stay that way. As events happen, they have to react to them in the persona I've given them; they're not allowed to act any other way.

So you control it quite strongly, how these characters behave?

No, I don't control them; that's the point. Once they're set, they're out of my control: they have to react to what happens.

What about what happens: do you have an idea of what will happen? I mean, obviously at the beginning you have an idea, but do things ever develop completely differently to what you expect?

Quite often. I know the end of the novel to some extent — I know the point I want to get to — but I don't know what will happen in the middle; that has to take its own way. So what happens generally is that the last 20,000 words might take up to six months to write because I simply don't know where I'm going and how I'm going to get there. And it might take me six months to work it out.

When you say the main characters have to be set, what do you mean? The main three or four? Is it also true of the minor but important characters?

No, they're the sort of people that major characters are liable to run into.

Because of the kinds of characters they are?

But also because of the circumstances under which they live.

I want to ask you about your female characters. I know you have been asked about them before, but I think in Genetic Soldier there is actually a change in your attitude towards them. Do you think there is a difference between the way you set your female characters and your male characters, or not? For instance, in The Sea and Summer, the two mothers: were they two characters that were already set?

No they weren't. The middle-class mother (Alison Conway) was an afterthought. When I started describing the house, the idea of the husband killing himself came to mind, and then I realised that there had to be something to hold the family together, so I turned back and wrote the introduction from her point of view. And it also gave me the final scene. But the two boys, Francis and Teddy, and Kovacs, they were set. And the other woman, the business woman, Nola Parkes. She was necessary in order to get the boy on his upward path.

So I'll ask the question again: do you think there is a difference in the way you set out to write about men and the way you set out to write about women?

Not sure. Let's go on a bit of a diversion here. Right from the start, when I first started to write, I was determined that there weren't going to be any forced love affairs. Because as far as I can see in actual life, either the

women are central to what's happening or they're peripheral. Even when you have a family man who is, let's say, involved in business affairs, the plot is going to hang on him. If you have the plot centred on a woman, you have to handle it from a different point of view. Now, I write about men, because I know them better. But when it comes to — there must be some women, naturally, then I sit down and start thinking: what sort of women are these liable to be? Now, for many years, before I started writing science fiction the personality of my mother dominated the female characters far too much. Eventually I got rid of her in *Beloved Son* — it was rather a brutal act, but still, I did it. Then I found that I was interested in my father, who I didn't know. Well, I was six years old when I last saw him, so I can't remember. From then on I started to concentrate on rather different female types. *Brain Child* used quite a lot of them, fairly experimentally really. In *The Destiny Makers* I knew what I was about then.

What do you mean, you experimented with female characters?

I gave them very definite, strong personalities. And they were created simply to kick the book along.

In Brain Child, when David Chance has that sexual experience with one of his 'aunts' — Belinda — that's quite an extraordinary scene. There's a woman who is so strong, even if she is a bit two-dimensional. That's a thing I find in your work, that you have a way of presenting female characters as two-dimensional, but enormously strong. It's confusing. I kind of admire them, but I don't understand their motivation. This happens more with your female characters than your male characters.

Yes. All my female characters are strong, but I've never sat down to think about it. I think what happens is that I conceive the strength first, then I build the woman around it.

It's not how you work with men.

Sometimes it is. Kotsakis in *The Destiny Makers* was like that. Whereas Ostrov (also in *The Destiny Makers*) has aspects of me. And Kovacs in *The Sea and Summer* appeared full blown. I don't know where he came from.

Perhaps it was a result of living all those years in St Kilda with all those East Europeans around you. Were you affected by that at all?

No. I'd had five or six years working in an employment office [1946–1951 approx.] so I knew all those different kinds of people backwards and forwards.

Do you still draw on that?

Yes I do for odd traits of personality and actions.

When you're writing, is each book a different experience? Can we talk about the difference between writing The Sea and Summer and Brain Child?

The Sea and Summer was an outcome of one of my mainstream novels. I simply wrote that with a complete concentration on the characters. *Brain Child* was a very deliberate book. It was started as a short story and I realised that I'd told the wrong tale. So I sat down and wrote the right one.

How long does it take you to write a book?

About two years.

And how does it happen? What happens in those two years?

Usually I start with an introductory 20,000 words to establish the theme and style, then I throw that out and start all over again.

How long does that take?

About six months.

And then you throw it out?

And then I write all the things I've learned in the six months.

When you say six months, do you sit down every day to write?

No, I'm very bad in that respect. I stop writing at the slightest excuse.

Is there a particular time of day when you like writing the most?

At night, although lately I've begun to write in the morning, since I've been here in Ballarat.

Are there times when the thing is doing nothing but gestating?

Whenever I come up against a point where I start wondering what happens next I simply stop and shove it down into my subconscious and in a week or two I can say *oh yes, that's it*.

What do you read, George?

What do I read?

I'm trying to get an idea of where you get your inspiration from. Where are your sources?

I read everything that you can think of. The classics, science, essays.

Do they input into your work as you're going along?

I don't know. They produce useful facts. My inspiration usually comes from whatever happens to be interesting me at the time.

What inspired Brain Child? Was it just concern about genetic engineering?

To a degree. But more the science fiction idea that the

super mentality has got to be a supermind in the way that we understand it: like our own minds, only better. I tried to point out that there might be all sorts of different minds. And that they wouldn't necessarily be better; they would be less effective in some ways. And then there's the question of how we as normal people would react to them. I came to the conclusion that on the whole we wouldn't want them (the superminds).

And that's the tragedy of Brain Child, isn't it, that they're like aliens and so the others don't want them. But is Brain Child also about a search that someone makes with their own life? Is the search for one's life a common thread in your work? It was there in Transit of Cassidy too.

Yes it is. But's common to a lot of novelists. It was there in *The Destiny Makers* too. Though Ostrov isn't really searching, he realises that he has to change his mind.

Change his mind about what?

About his whole attitude to life really. It begins with his parents who, as a youngster he's more or less despised, and finishes up in the last couple of pages looking to all the things he can do for other people. He's had a chance to have a look at his own subconscious.

It's interesting that both in The Destiny Makers and The Sea and Summer it's the ordinary people that you like, and that the reader gets to like. Do you admire these people who are struggling to live?

I don't know about admire them. I understand them.

Does that come from your own experience? Or from your mother and grandmother?

Actually it is mother's struggle. I've never really had to struggle. I haven't had it easy. On the whole I've had it pretty good. Even in times of recession I've always had a job.

There was that one time when you went to Sydney and you came home broke. You said that you literally had nothing.

Yes that's true. I had no money and no job. What did I do then?

All I know about is that John Bangsund gave you a typewriter.

Oh I know, I went to work for Carlton & United. It only took a few days. The first thing I tried was the Melbourne Tramways, but I had to tell so many lies about my age [GT was over 50] that it was a waste of time.

Did you want to be a tram conductor?

Anything. I just wanted a job.

George Turner the tram conductor — that would have been great.

Then I tried Carlton & United. Someone suggested it.

I had to lie about my age there too, but no one checked it. They found out eventually though.

What did you say when they found out?

They asked me why I'd lied, and I said that I needed a job, that's why. By that time I'd had a promotion so what the hell.

Getting back to the books; the last four are very different from one another, much more so than the first three science fiction novels [Beloved Son, Vaneglorry and Yesterdays' Men].

Yes. Three of them were set on totally different worlds. In fact that they were all set in the greenhouse was just a background.

With a book like The Destiny Makers which is so much about politics —

No.

You don't think so.

Pretty superficial politics.

It does have a go at political corruption of the kind that exists in the world today.

Yes; I accept corruption as part of politics.

What did you feel about The Destiny Makers when it was finished?

It was a 'plotty' novel. I was all the time working out how to get from point A to point B. The only really connecting thread in it was Ostrov's self discovery.

Well, if you weren't happy with it, did you try to rewrite it? Or did you just accept it the way it was?

No, I just accepted it the way it was. I got to the end and felt that any kind of rewriting would have to take a whole new theme.

So would you say that, of the last four novels, this was the one that satisfied you the least?

Yes.

How have the reviews been for the four?

They've all had good reviews, except *Brain Child* had one real stinker from Brian Stableford. But I didn't worry too much about that; on the whole they were well reviewed.

The Destiny Makers was too? Did anyone mention that it was too plot driven?

No.

Let's talk about Genetic Soldier. When did you finish writing it?

Sometime early in 1993.

What was the driving force for it?

Originally it was a short story called 'I Still Call Australia Home'. Someone, I think one of the fans, wrote and said that in the short story there didn't seem to be enough reason for a starship coming home to be driven away. So I provided a reason. And, working backwards from there, I had to create the different kind of characters. And it involved creating a world that was very simple on the surface and very complex underneath, because I don't believe that there are any simplicities in human relationships; none whatsoever. And it had to be a kind of civilisation that the 'old' people couldn't merge into, whether they wanted to or not. And there were lots of other things that I wanted to put in too. For instance, the idea of a starship leaving Earth and looking for other planets; now that's a commonplace of science fiction, and one of the things I wanted to point out is that as far as other liveable planets go, there might be one in ten million. It's very unlikely that they'd find any in a lifetime, which really is the reason why they wanted to come home.

In the Locus (August 1994) review it says that Genetic Soldier is a book about a homecoming starship, but it also calls it a Utopia. And you've just said that that's how it seems on the surface, but really in order for human beings to create a real Utopia, they'd have to become something else, wouldn't they? And there is the theme of belonging and the question of home. Tommy in Genetic Soldier eventually runs away from his home because he doesn't belong, even though he has always lived here.

He's running for his life.

Yes. But right from the start the reader senses that he is different, that he doesn't fit into the forced genetic system of the place. He's friends with someone who is not in his own group; his father is an Ordinand; he has a whole lot of things in him that mark him out, including the fact that he was conceived in 'Carnival'. And 'Carnival' is a very strange concept too, a time when anyone can mate with anyone. Is that part of the Utopia, or is that a 'disorder'? And is there something tragic about the starpeople coming home and not being able to stay. The disappointment of not finding yourself or what you're looking for is a common theme in your work, isn't it?

Yes. But I think it's true of most people. I think most people are disappointed with their lives. People grow up to marry and have children, and that is the great ambition, but I wonder how many of them are satisfied with it? They don't seem to be satisfied with their wives or husbands, or with their children. They think, if only they'd taken the other one it would have been better. But it would only have been different. I've always had the feeling that as human beings we're only at a transitional stage, that we're only at the beginning of understanding what it means to be human. And if we last several hundred thousand years, and we get to the roots of intelligence and are able to manage our lives, then humanity will begin. This is only a childhood stage.

Do you think that people are conscious of this? Do you think people are not just dissatisfied with their lives, but also with the limits of their humanity?

Yes. That could be true. Imagination is the great refuge.

For people like you and me, who were only children and found our refuge in books — and you started writing early too — imagination is the great refuge. But do you think that's true of everyone? For people who don't write or paint?

Of course. They dream of having money, they dream of having brilliant children, or success in their jobs. They always dream of something they're not capable of: the great ambition of the beauty contest winner who wants to go to Hollywood, but who'll just marry the boy next door.

When one first starts to read Genetic Soldier the air is clean and there are gum trees. The reader is aroused to a kind of longing. When you start writing about a world like that, or like the far-future world of the autumn people in The Sea and Summer, is there something in you that longs for that sort of world?

No, I'm a city boy. Not that I haven't had country experiences; I can appreciate it, but I don't want it.

Yet when you write about it, there is a strong sense of something very positive about it: the physical strength of people; the fact that they walk long distances and work hard.

The point of those people was simply that they were 'created' by a scientist hundreds of years before who thought he was producing people suited to their environment. What he got was human beings who went their own way.

What about the 'Library'? I mean, despite the perfection of these people in terms of their environment, they are so interested in the past that they find in the old books and they are also interested in a Buddhist kind of working-towards-Nirvana. The past, present and future are linked up. Why is it the past that is so important?

The past has always been important to humans; look at the fascination with historical novels. No, the general idea was that the scientist who created the genetic races had one ambition, but people being people found another one — for instance, the Ordinands and their interest in the investigation of the mind.

And the 'Net' is a result of that?

Yes: 'Indra's Net'. I had to do a lot of research for that. The general idea was expressed in the last line of the book.

But that is the strangest scene at the end. I mean, the starship people have stayed the same, and yet on Earth this extraordinary thing has happened: human beings have become something else.

The inspiration for that came from the Australian Abo-

riginal fascination with 'Dreamtime' and the Earth; the sense of belonging which is something I don't believe any other race has in such a strong way. There's a novel by someone that credits the *Kudaitcha* men with being able to separate the spirit from the body. But they don't talk about it because in Aboriginal hierarchy information can only be passed on to someone who has been initiated.

Is this interest that you have in Aboriginal society partly a result of your thinking about your own background?

Yes.

I don't think that many people know that you have Aboriginal ancestry. You've kind of meshed the Australian indigenous ideas with Buddhist ones.

And, of course, morphic resonance. Those experiments with the rats and the people were done and they were the real results. But no one's ever gone any further with it.

Yes, it's interesting how these concepts come up and then disappear. Getting back to Genetic Soldier, do you think it could be perceived as didactic at all? Is didacticism one of the marks of your work?

I think like anybody I have my perceptions of human nature and I try to write about real people. I'm not interested in superman heroes. People have to behave as I see them behaving. If there is any didacticism, it would be an outpouring of my own personal beliefs, and I've never really examined them to find out what they are. In *Genetic Soldier*, for instance, I don't know where didacticism would come in there. I don't know from one moment to the next where the plot was going. And the final chapter came as a result of a complaint that the book was unfinished. I wanted to end it at the point where Tommy said 'and now the stars'.

One of the other things I wanted to ask you about was the extraordinary sexuality of 'the match' in Genetic Soldier. Where did that idea come from?

It just suddenly appeared. It may have been simply that I was reading about pheromones and it clicked into position. And also it was logically possible.

Other animals do behave like that, don't they?

Butterflies can detect each other from a mile away. All the dogs in the neighbourhood know when a bitch comes on heat.

It was also about controlling violence, wasn't it?

Yes. I wanted to discuss how a civilised man would control violence.

Yes, but it was also about how women control the men in the Genetic Soldier society through 'the match'. The implication is that women aren't as violent as men.

My feeling about violence has always been rational. Kovacs in *The Sea and Summer* believes that violence is necessary under certain circumstances, but it practically kills him when he tries it.

Tommy in Genetic Soldier was like that too. In fact, it was one of the keys in the book, because he realised that he wasn't what he seemed to be at that point.

The book I'm writing at the present time will deal with the genetics that appear in *Genetic Soldier*. There will be the question raised that, if the Earth is overpopulated and the only means of getting it back into livable condition is to cull humanity, what is the moral standpoint? That is what the last part of the book will be about, with Ostrov (see *The Destiny Makers*) dealing with it to some extent, and that despite his *kill the lot of the bastards* reaction, he has to have a civilised approach. And he's up against the scientist Wishart, whose approach is simply that if it's necessary it's necessary. Who has the right to say if it's necessary?

This is something you've been thinking about for a long time — about the morality of it.

Well, you have the church complaining about abortion. They put the moral element into it right away.

They do and they don't. There are plenty of people who don't think it's immoral to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

What about Chinese morality, putting girl children on a hillside? Morality comes up against necessity. But whose necessity is the question. A human being is only a source of making another human being. God's great mistake was to give us brains.

I still want to talk about the extraordinary sexuality in Genetic Soldier and in Beloved Son. It's a typical George Turner thing that out of the blue you get a sexual event happening. It does always seem to be an extraordinary event in your work. In 'normal life' in your books we don't seem to get much sexuality referred to at all, in the every day. When it does happen it always seems to have great significance. Is there a reason for that? Do you think sexuality is a strong force?

Obviously it is. But I think it comes from memory.

A memory of an event in your life?

No, the whole business of sexual contact. You see, I had the prostate operation about ten years ago, and a prostate operation does nothing about preventing sexual requirements. What it does is prevent you from doing anything about it.

The desire is there but . . .

Actually it's been stronger than it ever was before.

Just before we finish up, do you have any thoughts about what

is happening in science fiction in general? Do you think there's anything new happening?

No, I don't think so. There are a few writers trying to keep up to date and handling new ideas as fast as they come out, but my real thought about science fiction at the present time is that it's been swamped by fantasy and that too many science fiction writers are trying to beat fantasy at its own game, turning out science fiction that really is fantasy except that it's hooked on a single idea of genetics, or virtual reality, or something of that sort. And that people are writing very long, involved novels that are about practically nothing; start with an idea and have an adventure. Start with an idea, I say, and see where it leads you.

Do you think it's because we're up against a huge number of problems but we don't seem to be up against any one particular thing that we can put our fingers on?

Well, yes, but one of my great complaints about science fiction is that it doesn't deal with our present problems at all. I mean, we've had dozens of novels in the past talking about an overpopulated Earth, but what you get in the outcome is bigger buildings and bigger cities; nobody talks about how we're going to feed them. Nobody talks about clearing the forests or running the animals off the ground, because that's too difficult. They never think out what the result of the bigger cities will be, and that's a great point.

Do you think that that's true only for science fiction, or for fiction in general?

In science fiction, money drives: that's what all the big novels are about. You feel as though the writers are turning them out over the weekend.

Do you think the mainstream pool is bigger, so you get greater variety?

I think it's the same for both. It's not usually the big sellers who are the best writers. I mean, people like Jeffery Archer are a catastrophe.

At this point we had a good laugh and I stopped the tape. We were both tired. George as usual had some new and interesting things to say about his work and the world, and had avoided the questions he didn't want to (or couldn't) answer. I was pleased that I had managed to broach some aspects of his work that he finds difficult to talk about — the question of female characters and of the way he deals with sex. Of course the answers weren't complete — but they were interesting. We had a cup of coffee and left to visit Dunwoodie's Butcher Shop in Ballarat and had a quick look at the Ballarat Art Gallery before I took the train back to Melbourne.

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THE UNRELENTING GAZE

GEORGE TURNER'S NON-FICTION: A SELECTION

