

The longest of pregnancies comes to fruition;
The slowest gestation at last reaches term;
And always, at last, there occurs parturition:
--Here, believe it or not, is

THE VINEGAR WORM

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FAPA 117 and a selection of
solid citizens from coast to
coast.

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Well sir, I went to the Tricon after all. Having made up my mind at the last possible minute, I pinched the egg money out of the sugar bowl, packed my other socks, cranked up the Marmon and headed West. As the record will show, I reached Cleveland safely, although from time to time the issue seemed to be in doubt. The common man on his way to holiday merrymaking has a somewhat unsettling effect when you meet him in large numbers on the turnpike.

In due course, however, the faery spires and domes of Cleveland, all golden in the last rays of the setting sun, appeared on the horizon, and in a trice I had sped to the hotel and registered. From that point it was just good clean fun and wholesome amusement all the way. There was, zum Beispiel, a movie show at a local theatre at-- God help us--10:00 A.M. the next day. The manufacturers had distributed tickets to all members of the convention, and those attending were asked to fill out comment cards. The picture was "Fantastic Voyage", starring several people, and it was rather better than I had expected. The special effects were the thing, of course, and they were very good indeed. I had read Time's review just the day before, and Time had come as close to praise as it allows itself to when it's dealing with something science fictional. That is to say, it confined itself pretty much to reciting the plot, making funnies along the way, and passing no judgment except to call it "The most entertaining SF movie since 'King Kong'". This may strike you and me as damning by damned faint praise, but coming from Time it's an encomium. Time described the leucocyte which destroyed the villain and the submarine as resembling "a large and aggressive hominy grit". That's sort of funny, but it set me to wondering: is there such a thing as a hominy grit? Singular? I've never heard the word used except in the plural, referring to the pallid gruel they serve with

your bacon and eggs down South. A dipper of grits might resemble that white corpuscle, but not a grit. And hominy, I have always thought, is grains of corn treated with acid to remove the tough integument, so that it becomes digestible, if not palatable. Is one grain of hominy a hominy grit? My notion has always been that grits are (is?) ground-up hominy. Will someone please explain this to me?

Well, so much for motion picture criticism. There were also showings of films of two television shows, "Star Trek" and "Time Tunnel". I didn't see the first of these, and I'd rather not talk about the second. I should mention, though, that the PR people for "Star Trek" brought along for publicity purposes a delightful lollipop who carried a ray gun and was dressed in a healthily arresting costume which featured skin. She was the most appetizing little dolly you can imagine, and she wasn't much older than my elder daughter, Francie. This last fact quickly extinguished any unworthy thoughts that may have brushed lightly across the surface of my mind, and as I watched the poopsie posing for the photographers, zapping away with her nifty ray gun, I fell to wondering what I would have thought of Francie doing that kind of work. The answer was, Not Much.

I was not pondering the question simply as mental thumb-twiddling. Francie is stage-struck, and has been in that condition for a long enough time to make it unlikely that it'll wear off. After two summers of classes at the Pittsburgh Playhouse, she found a job last summer as an apprentice at the Apple Hill Playhouse, which is a summer stock affair. There they worked her like a dog for sixteen or eighteen hours a day, in exchange for a bed in a cellar, and she loved it all passionately, and wept like a hydrant when the season was over. This was the same girl who had always considered herself to be the most put-upon child since Oliver Twist if her mother asked her to clear the table, and perhaps I should have rejoiced to see her taking pleasure in hard work. I think I might have, conceivably, if she'd been earning some money instead of costing me twenty dollars or so every week. But I wasn't happy about the theatre addiction to begin with, and to see her working herself to exhaustion and forking out money at the same time seemed to be laying it on a bit thick. For her, though, it was apparently a perfect summer; her small parts in a half-dozen plays and the continuous company of the professional actors were paradise enow, and I fear she has become hopelessly confirmed in her folly.

Youthful ambition and idealism see the theatrical world in terms of Shakespeare and Ibsen (or Kopit and Albee) and Noble Dedication and romantic Sacrifices for Art. In reality it is, for all but a few, coolie wages and work that is dull or degrading or both, and the assumption of a set of values that are meretricious and principles that are, at best, doubtful. One of the principles seems to be that the Bohemian life is a proper life. That is absurd, for more reasons than I have time to go into here; but it is a notion which has a strong appeal for the young people who have been reared in today's world. A seventeen year old will have read a good deal in those superficial analysts who see Suburbia as the symbol of all that is bad and wrong-valued in American life, and it is a perfectly natural manifestation of youthful rebellion to want to embrace Bohemia, particularly when the alternative is parentally-approved,

But until someone demonstrates that squalor is a necessary prerequisite to intellectual respectability and integrity, I will continue to hold that comfort is a worthy secondary goal in life. (Indeed, to most of the world's population, it is the single and only goal.) The chrome-plated gadgets that our Packards and Keatses and Whytes hate so much are simply useful contrivances, and to own them and to use them to your comfort is in no way debasing, your sophomore sociology professor to the contrary notwithstanding. Einstein listening to his twelve-tube super-heterodyne walnut-finish cabinet model radio was still Einstein.

There were a lot of people at the convention, many of them science fiction fans. There were also monster fans, comics fans, Burroughs fans, Tolkien fans, and, I daresay, Laura Lee Hope fans. I have frequently wondered how it came about, this admixture of Jungle Comics readers to the supposedly literate ranks of science fiction fandom. Of course it is true that most of us were avid readers of Burroughs and comic magazines in our bandaid-on-the-knee days, and that we saw as many monster movies as our parents would allow. That's a proper and natural thing, and there's nothing at all wrong with Ackerman's little followers except that they do rather clutter up a convention. But what are we to make of people past voting age whose reading tastes have reached a dead-center hang-up on the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs? This seems to me to be great curiosity, and a matter worthy of study and investigation. There's probably no harm in it, and I'd be the last person in the world to condemn somebody because he's got a nutty hobby--after all, I'm a science fiction fan myself--but I am most curious about these people. Most of the SF fans I know, and almost certainly all of you who are reading this magazine, are people who do a lot of reading of all kinds. You know who won the Hugoes, all right, and you probably can discourse ad lib. for as long as anyone will listen on the subject of, say, symbolism in the works of Polton Cross, but you also are quite obviously omnivorous readers. Is this true of the members of the Burroughs cult? I ask this seriously. Can anyone who regularly reads ordinary adult fare actually read Burroughs for fun? And not only read, but reread and reread, as apparently they do? I doubt it; I think that Burroughs is all they read. I think they read right through the canon and then go back and start over. They'd have to: if they read anything else they wouldn't be able to stomach the Burroughs.

The Tolkien people are less numerous, more literate, and are not the victims of a single overriding passion, as the Burroughses are; and if they are fanatical about their sacred book it is no doubt with better reason than the Burroughses. I find their enormous admiration for Tolkien incomprehensible, but chacun a son gout; perhaps they're right and I'm wrong. Banks Mebane says he plans a paper on Tolkien's style, and I have no doubt whatever that he will establish to his own satisfaction and that of the other Tolkien enthusiasts that Tolkien is a master of English prose, the possessor of a style that is in every way admirable. It's even possible that he will persuade me that the fault is in me, and that I am simply too dense or too insensitive or too tone-deaf to appreciate Tolkien. If that unlikely event should take place, I still reserve the right not to wear a button on which "Bilbo Lives" is written in High Dwarvish.

As I said before, there were a lot of people at the convention, and I saw many old friends and made some new ones. Following

immemorial custom, I beg to report that I have now met forty-three members of FAPA and eleven waiting-listers, worthy citizens all. Of new acquaintance, I was particularly taken with Sid and Alva Rogers and Tom Sherred, who struck me as three of Nature's noblefolk. I spent quite a bit of time with them, to my pleasure and enlightenment. I also met John Boardman for the first time. George Scithers introduced us and we shook hands in a civil fashion and he gave me a copy of his fanzine. That was the total extent of our intercourse, which no doubt was sensible; we would almost certainly have wasted valuable convention time in political argument if we had been at all in each other's company. Still, I rather wish I had said something to him about his letter to Charles Wells in the last mailing. Boardman, in this letter, revealed that he has the curious delusion that the function of a foreign policy is to bring happiness to foreigners, particularly Asiatics. His whole letter proceeded from this fantasy, and hence has a certain air of unreality. This is not wholly surprising; Boardman's grip on reality has always seemed to me to be a little tenuous. He makes no secret of the fact that he is a fan of I.F. Stone's sinister little communoid newsletter, in the pages of which the real world is almost entirely ignored, and this letter of his is a part of the same dream-world. The purpose of a foreign policy, as every schoolboy knows, is to insure the welfare of the country which pursues that policy. American foreign policy is intended to further the interests of the United States. The war in Vietnam is a facet of our foreign policy. Thus, if one wishes to argue against the war in Vietnam, he must show that the war is not in the best interests of the United States.

Possibly that can be done. Perhaps it can be demonstrated that a communist takeover in Vietnam will not be harmful to this country. But I think not; it appears to be reasonably plain that the whole peninsula will go under if Vietnam does, and the enemy will have an enormous salient. This would obviously be against the best interests of the United States, and, accordingly, must be prevented. The point remains arguable, however, and it is one which I enjoy debating. I will gladly enter into a discussion of it at any time with anyone at all. But the discussion must address itself to that point. I distrust and suspect the motives of those whose argument purports to be from purely humanitarian motives. There are, to be sure, sincere and convinced pacifists, who simply do not believe in the taking of human life under any circumstances, ~~and~~ whatever the consequences of surrender. These are admirable people, and they deserve our respect for their principles, if not their judgment or wisdom. But they are only the very tiniest fraction of the advocates of surrender in Vietnam. The great majority of the draft-card burners and placard carriers and writers of surrender editorials are highly selective humanitarians; they grieve about only such deaths as suit their political purpose. You can put these people to the test: when someone says the war in Vietnam should be stopped because of the lives it is costing, find out whether he objected to the death of Germans in the second world war; or if he is too young for that, ask if he entered a protest against the butchery committed by Castro when he took over in Cuba; and if he is too young for that, get his opinion about the "anti-colonial" killing in Africa. Most of these characters are grinding a political axe, and their humanitarian oozing must be discounted.

I don't know what it may be a sign of, but it seemed to me that there were fewer beatniks at the convention than there had been at

the two previous conventions I attended. A partial explanation is of course that the ones you know don't register as beatniks, but simply as a person--interesting or dull--with some odd ideas about grooming. And it has given me great pleasure to observe that under many a dirty sweat shirt beats the heart of a decent Babbitt. You don't often find someone as consistent in his conformity as a beatnik, and it's reassuring, in a way, to be able to predict someone's opinions on almost any subject simply by observing his clothes. Indeed, I believe it would have a salutary effect upon the mass psyche, in these uncertain times, if each and every adult could own a pet beatnik. They are so charmingly predictable.

You will understand that this comment on beatniks has no reference whatever to beards. I haven't dared to say anything that might conceivably be construed to be disparaging of beards since Avram took me most mercilessly to task a while back for what he held to be a slighting of beards. Anyhow, practically all the beards at the convention were handsome articles, carefully trimmed and kempt, what might be called Madison Avenue beards. In most cases they enhanced the appearance of their wearers, lending an air of dignity and sagacity, and were wholly different from the raffish beatnik article. I refer here to such beards as the Carr, the White, the deCamp. I happened to witness an incident in which a good lady from the outside world, who had put in an appearance at the convention for reasons of her own, found herself involved in an obviously distasteful tete-a-tete with a fairly far-out type, and fell upon Terry Carr with cries of joy. It was an enormous relief, she said, to find a real gentleman here among the wild folk. It's hard to see how a beard could receive a finer accolade than that.

The Hugoes. I didn't care much for "'Repet, Harlequin! Said the Ticktockman" when first I read it, and rereading it in the Nebula award volume didn't change my opinion. And Dune is no doubt harder science fiction than This Immortal, but as a novel it's simply not in the same class as the Zelazny book. As for ERB-dom, I've never seen a copy, so I can't agree or disagree with the vote. I suppose that for people who like that sort of thing, that is the sort of thing they like. I watched the presentation of the awards from a sort of anteroom, having missed the banquet. I had got myself involved in a small kaffeeklatsch where the talk was good, and arrived fifteen or twenty minutes late to find that there wasn't a vacant chair in the place. Bad management somewhere.

Little need be added. There were, of course, a number of orgies, where houris in clinging, diaphanous veils wafted gracefully through sumptuous suites bearing exotic liquors and rare viands, and where the usual unspeakable rites were performed. All this is pretty much SOP at a convention, and there would be little point in my going into detail. The trip home took three hours and forty-five minutes, and the Marmon used twenty-two gallons of gasoline.

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Last month I did a considerable amount of travelling in the mountains of West Virginia. It was my favorite time of year and the weather was very fine. You can't drive very fast there, because the roads twist like frayed-out rope-ends, and I had a rare opportunity to watch the October hills make their annual transition from summer to November. It was, for one who has never been much of a lover of nature or landscapes, a surprisingly satisfying experience.

As one will, when impressed by beauty or spectacle, I found myself trying to get the sight into words, and scraps of description began to run through my head. They didn't work, of course. A sober, realistic description tended to become a simple listing of colors, and unfortunately I don't know the names of any but the primary colors; one would need to be a painter or an interior decorator to know the proper names, and the chances are that the color-list would communicate only with other painters or interior decorators. I had also an impulse to use some high-flown language featuring hackneyed incendiary images: "frozen burst of flame", "ablaze among the sober browns", and the like. These were worse than the color-catalogue.

It is an obvious truth that a picture is worth a good many words (some estimates put it as high as ten thousand) in portraying the appearance of a thing. A good color photograph would have preserved the exact look of the hills. It would not, however, have captured what I saw, or thought or believed I saw, in those trees. And that is another way of saying that I wanted to describe not only the seasonable hills, but to describe them as I saw them through the lens of the emotion which they had themselves evoked.

It is not saying, however, that I wanted to describe my emotions; these were stock matter, directly off the shelf. I was in that elegiac, autumnal mood of self-indulgent melancholy that seeps its gluey way into every heart at the sight of October haze in the forest, and watch the rich, beautiful prose, bud. To describe these emotions would be banal and dull. But to create this same feeling in someone else by describing the hills--that's what writing is about.

It's a poet's job, of course, and whatever I am or may become, I will never be a poet. Still, this kind of thing has been accomplished in prose, most notably by Hemingway, and to essay it makes a useful and instructive exercise for the amateur of rhetoric, just as the Sunday golfer aspires to shoot like Arnie Palmer. (One does not, of course, inflict his finger exercises on other people.) There's nothing wrong with feeling the standard emotions; after all, they wouldn't be standard if they weren't popular. It is the describing of them that is otiose. And it is the creating of them that marks the artist.

There was, in a bygone era, an American poetaster named Bliss Carmen, who has probably been forgotten by everybody but me. He wrote some verse that is apposite here because it's about Autumn and illustrates my point. It seems improbable that I should remember this fragment after thirty years or more, but it must have made quite an impression on me in my salad days. The part I remember goes like this:

The scarlet of the maples can shake me like a cry
Of bugles going by;
And my lonely spirit thrills
To see the frosty asters like a smoke upon the hills.

That, I submit, is an exemplary goat for separation from the woolly lambs of poetry. The man was shaken up. We know because he tells us so. "See," he says, "I am shaken; my lonely spirit thrills." He makes no bones about it; he is frank. And one's response to the revelation is "Uhuh," or perhaps "What an ass." We are not ourselves moved by the fact that he was.

Now take a real poem about Autumn. These lines are from "Ode to the West Wind"; I am quoting from memory, and may be a bit off here and there:

O wild west wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
Yellow and black and pale and hectic red. . .

Here the poet doesn't have a word to say about the effect of those blowing leaves on his sensitive soul, but something of the emotion he felt is conveyed to the reader because he put the words together right. You can find the same thing in Hemingway, in, for example, the first paragraph of the "Retreat from Caporetto" section of A Farewell to Arms. "Now in the fall the trees were all bare and the roads were muddy" says the first sentence, and the paragraph proceeds with the same deceptive simplicity to describe the autumn countryside. It is prose with a total lack of "fine writing" and charged language. But the emotion is conveyed. It is conveyed.

Back to our trees, now. The camera, to repeat, would do the best possible job of communicating their appearance, right down to the haze among them. But the non-visual contributors to their total effect--the crispness of the air, the autumn sounds of the forest, the smell of leaf-smoke--these are missing. And while these things cannot be reproduced by any art-form, they help create the feeling that should go into any artistic representation of the trees. Logic seems to bring us at this point to painting as the best means of preserving the essence of fall in the mountains: as close an approximation of the actual appearance as the technique of the painter permits, together with whatever of feeling his skill allows and his taste decrees. The catch here is that the painter nowadays is inclined to make his production all feeling and no representation. This means that while his sloshes of paint are doubtless of enormous satisfaction to him, they convey nothing, of feeling or idea, to anyone else.

Neither do words, however deeply felt they may be, if they are not arranged in useful order. Form is essential, in writing as in painting. Unhappily, our poets have gone almost as far as our painters in forgetting this elementary truth. Or perhaps they never heard of it. In one of his essays Malcolm Cowley tells about being asked to give a "workshop period" in poetry at a writers' conference. He says that after about five minutes of talking about some common problem of verse structure he became aware that most of the class of sixty or so didn't seem to know what he was talking about. He stopped and asked, "How many know what an iamb is?" Nobody answered. "An iambic foot in poetry." He wrote it on the blackboard. A few hesitant hands went up. He spent the rest of the workshop period giving an elementary talk on English metrics.

Now these were, evidently, people who were interested in writing poetry, who thought of themselves as writers of one sort or another, who were, in fact or aspiration, professionals. Perhaps some of them even thought of themselves as poets, and had had some free verse with odd typography printed in a little magazine. But they didn't know what an iamb is. It is difficult to account for this phenomenon. Would they have come to a workshop in the short story without knowing what a plot is--or a paragraph or a sentence? Or to a workshop in the novel without having heard of a chapter, or dialogue or exposition? What did they think they were doing there? What--to get to the heart of the matter--did they think poetry is?

Here's what I believe they thought: I think they saw poetry as

a kind of writing that is totally divorced from form and discipline, a collection of words that need only have strong feeling behind them to qualify as poetry. How else are we to account for the present vogue for Allen Ginsburg, for example, who is no more a poet than I am Charles deGaulle? The writer of free verse who cannot write a sonnet and the painter of abstractions who cannot draw an acceptable nude are alike fakers, and fakers pure and simple. And neither of them will ever be able to tell us about the trees in October.

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A recent letter from Orson Gansfather leads me to believe that there is yet hope for the Sense of Wonder. Orson is working on a novel which he intends as the first of a series and from what he tells me, I'd guess that the good old days are in for a renaissance.

This series will be about a Hero named Belbar. Belbar's parents, the world's richest biologist and his wife, were living in a small cabin in the jungles of Mars, a planet with a breathable atmosphere and delightful weather, when the wife, pregnant with Belbar, was carried off by a wasting disease frequently encountered on Mars. The father, to preserve the life of his unborn son, transplanted the foetus to the womb of a female skate. (The skates were fur-bearing arboreal primates indigenous to the red planet.) The father was almost immediately thereafter reduced to paté by the male skates, who resented liberties being taken with their womenfolk. After an uneventful confinement the female was delivered of Belbar, whom she named Belbar and raised as her own son.

Well, you can imagine Belbar's childhood there in the jungle, fighting all kinds of animals with no weapons but a sword he found in his parents' cabin. He became enormously skilled in the use of this sword, and when a clever little fellow named Brown Vermin turned up in the jungle, the two of them formed a team and travelled about Mars battling magicians, wizards, djinni, efreetts and other such unhallowed practitioners. Belbar had by this time grown to a muscular eight feet high, and had skin of a pleasant sunburnt color. There was something about his appearance that was particularly appealing to princesses, of which there was a God's plenty on Mars.

An odd-looking local character named Blogo had in his possession a brooch which was a pretty nasty article and could lead to the triumph of Evil in the Universe if not nullified by being thrown into a well on Algol Nine. Accordingly, a trusty band of comrades was formed to return the brooch to the well. Besides Belbar and Brown Vermin, there were Elfil, a fairy, Sechsia, a princess, von Eckersall, an engineer, and Fred Kirby, a monster. The Brotherhood of the Brooch all wore handsome leather uniforms which included riding breeches and boots, and each carried a jewel which had been fashioned by the master-craftsmen of Artesia. This jewel served as identification and gave the wearer magic powers.

High adventure of course ensued. Few things are as thrilling as battles with sword and dagger at faster-than-light speeds, and there is a good deal of this sort of thing. There are also many dandy descriptions of feasts and drinking-bouts, which will positively make your mouth water. And you may be sure that all of this is pure and wholesome matter, none of which would bring a blush to the cheek of a young girl. (Elfil is a fairy-tale type of fairy.)

All in all, it's real good stuff. The second volume will probably be even better.