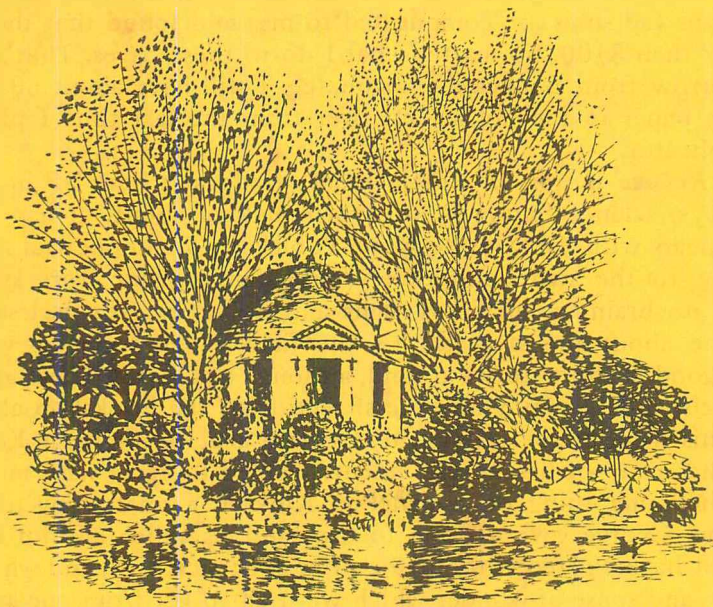


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# THE METAPHYSICAL REVIEW

No. 1

July 1984



## *FIRST ISSUE:*

YVONNE ROUSSEAU

LUCY SUSSEX

BRUCE GILLESPIE

discuss: Stanley Elkin, Damien Broderick,  
the Meaning of Life, and the Usual Exciting  
Pot-Pourri of Wonderful Bits and Pieces . . .

## I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

I realise that I should not apologise for not publishing a general-circulation fanzine for three years. Everybody has an off-year or three. Everybody returns. Everybody apologises. So, I apologise for my apologies. Now I'm back, but *SF Commentary* isn't.

*SF Commentary* is dead; long live the fanzine. Van Ikin and I held the funeral in *Science Fiction 15*, which is subtitled 'The Last SF Commentary'. I typeset that issue last October. It was a good wake. I have few regrets about losing the old deceased. If I sound maudlin when I mention *SF Commentary*, it's because I realise how much of my life it's responsible for. If it ever returns, it will be because once again I have the income to keep *SFC* in the style to which it became accustomed. *Science Fiction 15* is, in case you did not receive it, available from Dr Van Ikin, Department of English, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA 6009. It costs \$A 10 for 4.

What's *The Metaphysical Review*? A bit of a straitjacket, I can tell you. Less than 20 pages, and some of them wasted in covers and editorials and the like. But I did all these complicated sums (all sums are complicated to me) and found that the postage bill will run to more than \$100, no matter what I do to these pages. That's another \$100 I'll have to borrow from Bankcard. Fortunately I still have about 60 reams of white A4 duplicating paper in the house, left over from the last time I planned to publish *SFC* on a duplicator.

*The Metaphysical Review* is not *SF Commentary*. It doesn't have 'sf' in the title, for a start. These days, science fiction is not worth talking about, at least not the genre stuff which appears with 'SF' on the spine. Publishers of commercial sf seem to have yielded entirely to the sword-and-sorcery/misty-fantasy/*Star Wars* syndrome: either all action and no brain, or all heavy sighs and no action. It's useless to keep publishing a magazine about the sf *field*: it's the field which seems so worthless. There are still some good sf short stories around, although not many. There are almost no good new sf novels, unless you ignore the sf section of the bookshop altogether.

You've heard all this from me before. I said it in two articles for Leigh Edmonds's *Rataplan* last year, and many of his correspondents seemed to agree with me. George Turner said much the same thing on a panel at Kinkon, a small convention held recently in Melbourne. George gave a name to those books which are not on the sf shelf, which could not have existed without the prior existence of sf, and which often have the enjoyability and sense-of-wonder which we used to get from our sf. George called these books 'para-fiction'. He named a few examples as *An Unusual Angle* (Greg Egan), *Lavington Pugh* (Jay Bland), and *The Plains* (Gerald Murnane), all published by Norstrilia Press, and *Just Relations* (Rodney Hall; published by Penguin), *Lanark* (Alasdair Gray; Granada), and *The Affirmation* (Christopher Priest; Faber). On the same panel, John Foyster put forward much the same idea: that by taking a bit of trouble sf readers could find books in general literature which are much more satisfactory sf than those appearing under the label. John mentioned three recent examples, all from the letter 'M' in his library: Ted Mooney's *Easy Travel to Other Planets*, Michael Malone's *Dingley Falls*, and Wright Morris's *The Falk River Space Project*. My own list of recent enjoyable 'para-fictions' included John Calvin Batchelor's *The Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica* (straight-down-the-line science fiction, but not published as such in USA) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which seems like fantasy to a Westerner, but reads as documentary fact to an Indian or Pakistani. I'm not sure where Stanley Elkin's *George Mills* fits: as you can see from Yvonne Rousseau's review in this issue, large sections of it could be called fantasy.

The panel was interesting for more than just our booklists. Almost nobody in the audience at Kinkon could name an sf novel that he or she had enjoyed reading lately. Quite a few people named recent sf award-winners—as books that they could not finish reading. Unfinishable books included: Donaldson's 'Thomas the Covenanter' books; Asimov's *Foundation's Edge*; David Brin's Nebula-winning *Startide Rising*; Benford's

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Against Infinity; Bishop's No Enemy But Time; and Crowley's Little, Big. Jan McDonald, who was on the panel with us, liked an author named Barbara Handley, but I hadn't heard of her.

#### EXCITING POLICY STATEMENT

What will I publish in The Metaphysical Review? That's a question which has puzzled me, too. The easy answer is: the same sort of mixture as in Rataplan, but with a Gillespie twist. Lots of good writing about lots of good things: general fiction, children's fiction, people, places, non-fiction, music, films, restaurants, to name a few possibilities. Even sf and fantasy, if that's what you want to write about.

Another answer: whatever really interests you. That's what I told Russell Blackford when he asked me what sort of contribution I would like for the new magazine. Letters are always welcome, and so are original ideas and opinions. If you want to write at length, please get in touch with me first. I rejected very little when I was publishing SF Commentary, so the backlog became a huge pile. I don't want that to happen again. And, to repeat an important point, the main limitation to this magazine is space, because the main constraint is the price of postage, which will probably increase again in October.

I want to reduce the mailing list as far as possible. The main inheritance from SF Commentary is a mailing list of more than 300. Of those, 150 were subscribers, and each subscription paid for only about a quarter of the real cost of the magazine being received. In other words: no subscriptions from now on. If you want The Metaphysical Review, keep in touch or I'll drop you from the mailing list. Send me your change of address; send a postcard; anything. But if I don't hear from you for awhile, I will think that you've moved and that the magazine copies are not reaching you.

#### BORING LIFE AND TIMES

Not much has happened to Bruce Gillespie and Elaine Cochrane since I sent out SFC 62/63/64/65/66 in July 1981. All our problems have been financial, and all our pleasures have been private.

That's not true, of course, but it sounds better than the disorganised truth. We ran out of money in mid-1982, after we returned from a very enjoyable holiday at Mt Buffalo Chalet which cost us all we had left in the bank. Very luckily, Elaine found a job proofreading. That was one income. Unluckily, I have failed to provide the other income. Sometimes I have a good run of freelance work, and often I don't. When I've had the money to publish a fanzine, I have not had the time. When I've had time (such as six weeks' effective unemployment at the end of last year), I haven't had the money.

Besides, I made a Gigantic Financial Blunder in October 1982 by publishing SF Commentary Reprint Edition: First Year 1969. Despite some good publicity and some very favourable reviews, the Reprint has not sold well. I'm still \$4000 down on the total costs. I overestimated the potential market for the Reprint because I've had, over the years, many requests for photocopies of back issues. I published the Reprint at the price it would have cost to photocopy the original pages, i.e. \$40. That proved to be the



unit cost of each copy. All I can do is thank those people who did buy copies of the Reprint, and say that I will not repeat the experiment with the SFC issues of 1970, 1971, or 1972.

During the last three years we've met many interesting people and eaten many fine meals, listened to music and read books, but mainly tried to survive. Chris Priest came to dinner in 1982, and Solomon, our large brown tabby, sat on his lap. Harry and Joan Harrison visited us early this year, and Solomon sat on Joan's lap. Harry and Joan cheered me greatly by delivering the Harrison Award for Increasing the Status of Science Fiction Internationally (an award from the World SF organisation). It's a large green translucent slab which goes nicely with the black monoliths on the mantel shelf. No cat has managed to knock it to the floor... yet.

It's a pity, though, that science fiction itself has declined so much in quality during the time I'm supposed to have been increasing its status internationally.

Mentioning the Harrison Award reminds me that the best way to become a fannish legend is to stop publishing your fanzine. In Ted White's famous article about Australian fanzines for Irwin Hirsh's Sikander, Ted lets SFC off the hook, but takes a very critical look at other Australian fanzines. But what if SFC had still been going? I think Ted could have found as many faults there as in any other magazine. Stop publishing for long enough and you're a legend. I don't mind having my faults forgotten; but it does mean that anything I publish in future, such as The Metaphysical Review, will seem tame compared with the legend. Forget the legend... please.

During 1982 I expected Something to Turn Up. In 1983, I began to get used to the idea that nothing would. My life had changed direction so many times during the 1970s that I had become drunk on change. Maybe one's life is supposed to slow down after one's mid-thirties. Dull, though. I began to explore a few personal, internal directions, which I've written about for a future issue of Leigh Edmonds's Rataplan (PO Box 433, Civic Square, ACT 2608). After reading some of the work of C. G. Jung and attending some lectures about his ideas, I began to keep a day-to-day journal, parallel with a dream diary. I've abandoned the diary-journal, as my life makes dull reading. I've kept up the dream diary, because occasionally my unconscious turns up some interesting short stories. The best of them I remember with that glow which surrounds the memory of a favourite short story. I'm working on converting some of the best of them into stories with a more conventional form. I expected to receive some great insights into my character from all this, but haven't. In most of my dreams I'm the failure, the outsider, the social misfit, just as in ordinary life. I haven't developed any previously undiscovered talents. But I do enjoy reading back through some of my favourite dreams.

Most of my life has been filled by hitting deadlines for various freelance jobs. Because of the principles of professional discretion, I cannot discuss the job I've worked on for the last year, a major historical book for OUP. I've typeset all the Nerstrilia Press books you know and love, including Dreamworks (which everybody mistakenly reviewed as science fiction), Greg Egan's An Unusual Angle (which shows what an ordinary Australian school is really like), and George Turner's new book, In the Heart or In the Head: An Essay in Time Travel.

I typeset Damien Broderick's Transmitters for Ebony Books (which is Jenny and Russell Blackford). It's a jolly and intriguing book, I hope to publish a review of it soon.

Many people have been wading through this guff waiting for me to mention the most important members of our household: the cats. Lulu, a neat little black cat, turned up at the door and happened to mention that she was very good company and that she had picked our house as her next home. After an introduction like that, how could we refuse? A fluffy grey tabby kitten did the same to Sally Yeoland and John Bangsund in Brunswick, but they showed the kitten to us, and now Oscar is a valued member of the Keele Street tabby mafia. Ishtar, our beautiful, fluffy, silly, honey cat died of kidney failure last year. Meanwhile, TC, who is the great-great-grandson of the Magic Pudding Club's Ersatz, has suffered one disaster after another. He suffered from lungworm. Often he gets flu. He's been on Ovarid tablets for awhile, so he's been overweight. And his kidneys are slowly packing up. Somehow he keeps surviving.

I dare say Elaine would have lots of interesting things to tell you if she revives the 'Sins of My Old Age' column she began in SFC. Meanwhile I'll note down autobiographical natterings when I think of them, and include them here when I have room.

#### MUSELY...

...which is one of the hundreds of names I played with before I went back to The Metaphysical Review, which last appeared as an apazine in 1972. Eventually I'll develop 'Musely' into a regular column about all the muses which interest me.

Meanwhile I do not have room here to continue my time-honoured tradition of listing the Best of the Year in Nearly Everything and providing comments on the items. I'm three years behind, anyway.

Without consulting any of my lists, I would say that the most enjoyable books I've read during the last three years have been Memories, Dreams, Reflections and Answer to Job, both by C. G. Jung, and Riders in the Chariot, the best Patrick White novel I've read. Gerald Murnane's The Plains was also very good.

I continue to watch mainly pre-1954 black-and-white films on late-night television. My favourite film seen during recent years has been Frank Capra's It's a Wonderful Life. The best recent film I've seen has been Richard Benjamin's My Favourite Year. Elaine and I enjoyed the two Mozart feasts, Bergman's The Magic Flute and Losey's Don Giovanni.

Jenny Bryce and John Foyster suggested we go with them to see The Magic Flute. This set off a great splurge of enthusiasm for the music; we've bought two versions since then and listened to several others. ABC-FM's monthly 'Record Forum' program has encouraged us to compare versions of different works, and we particularly enjoyed the lengthy comparison made between the old British-bulldog versions of Handel's Messiah and the new prissier-than-thou versions recorded on original instruments. I still like best our old 1962 Boulton version, which sounds good, but also keeps all the enthusiasm and good cheer needed to do justice to such a work.

Enough about music. No more room left. I haven't forgotten the letters which people sent to SFC 62/63/64/65/66; I'm arranging to publish them separately. See you next issue of The Metaphysical Review.



YVONNE ROUSSEAU writes reviews for Australian Book Review and occasional articles and short stories for other magazines. She has also published The Murders at Hanging Rock (Scribe), which I recommend.

## STANLEY ELKIN'S MILLION DETAILS

by Yvonne Rousseau

Discussed:

George Mills, by Stanley Elkin

(E. P. Dutton; 1982; 508 pp.; \$A23.95)

I

One of Stanley Elkin's most characteristic effects resembles the achievement of a character from his earlier novel, The Dick Gibson Show (1971) - a man whose eidetic memory enables him to reel off every detail of any scene he has glimpsed momentarily. As a dazzled witness says, 'The thousand things, the million details... I had it all for the first time. I hadn't known how much there was before.'<sup>1</sup> The impression of abundance in Elkin's prose enhances the wonders of the mediaeval adventure at the beginning of George Mills. This adventure is 'oral tradition... the hand-me-down history of a millennium of Mills raconteurs, impossible to check' (p. 2), and thus the conversations are transmuted into talk that sounds right to the Millses of later centuries - 'No class, guv. They're a bolshy lot', for example (p. 7) - and the wide-ranging references (the Maginot Line, GIs, Kentucky windage, Hamlet, Brasso) serve to extend - far into the centuries of civilisation stretching ahead of them - the already vast territory of the unknown that surrounds Mills and his lordling and their two horses as they wander across unmapped Europe, more than 150 years before Marco Polo's birth.

The book's first sentence is, 'Because he knew nothing about horses.' Reading on, one brings oneself up to date much as one does when introduced to a group of friendly strangers whose continuing conversation shows that they have known each other for many years; there are numerous clues from which one forms increasingly confident conjectures - a dimension of strangeness is added by early, phantasmal hypotheses, left suspended - in these early stages, life's possibilities seem inexhaustible. The rhythms of the prose shift so that the reader is never lulled - yet the mixture of aptness and unexpectedness ensures that one never becomes fatigued by the constant necessity to rock back a little, to pause and look again. The pace continues fast, however unpredictable the prose; for example, three people, discovering that a fourth has just died (and voided his bowels) in their presence, are proved to be 'not in shock but in shock's agitate, high-strung otherness, their reckless affections jumpy with rampage' (p. 211).

Back in mediaeval Europe, Mills and his lordling (Guillalume) have set out from Northumbria to join Godefroy de Bouillon, launching the First

Crusade. Ignorant of the correct route, stableboy Mills has silently decided simply to let the horses have their head: 'Great snooty brutes. Droppin' their dirt where they please' (p. 4). Taking the path of least resistance and lushest feed, the horses in seven months transport them to an environment so utterly alien that it is 'Adventure, Adventure itself' (p. 11). Have the beasts led them to the mysterious El Dorado of Horseland? Is it a country of Giants - the barbarians they are meeting merely immature, or even infants? For answer, a merely human salt merchant sets them to work in a Polish salt mine, where Mills's horse will move in obedient circles only if Mills continuously talks to it. They escape, with the salt merchant as hostage; they are confronted by a hundred wild Cossacks, in search of the Word; Mills, the lowest in rank, is commanded to placate them with a message of some sort. Understandably, his text turns out to be that 'killing isn't nice' (p. 40); his horse, accustomed to circle at the sound of his voice, circles around him; and the awed Cossacks, worshippers of horses, cast aside their weapons. Mills has accomplished the real First Crusade, and has also invented dressage, as he earlier invented the term 'pica': 'in those days, as in these, everyone invented something' (p. 19); he is also the originator of English picnics. On their return home, Guallalume finds himself promoted (by the deaths of his brothers in Godefroy's Crusade) and he puts Mills 'back in the stables because it would not do for one so high placed to have as a retainer a man who knew nothing of horses' (p. 42).

The Mills family is to survive for almost a thousand years - each generation consisting of one child only, and every child called George. The last of them is fifty-two and childless in 1980, in Missouri. Every new George Mills is initiated, at his father's knee, into the history of the mediaeval 'Greatest Grandfather' Mills, and of how the family curse first fell upon him in 1097. He learns to recite the life-stories of all the subsequent Millses - their mysterious fate, various but inexorable.

Such a curse, such a preservation of family traditions, at once recalls to mind the Gothic aristocracies of literature: Edgar Allan Poe's 'House of Usher... noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament'; G. K. Chesterton describing how 'the Doom of the Darnaways... unfolded itself like a horrible flower'; Violet Trefusis, with her fictional lady's 'domed, doomed family forehead' - and with her non-fictional Vita Sackville-West, in whom 'the profound hereditary Sackville eyes were as pools from which the morning mist had lifted'.

The mediaeval George Mills captures this kind of glamour when, defining women in general, he speaks of the 'beauty that seditions their emotions and turns even fright to ornament and pain to grace' (p. 25). But the Millses' emotions are not seditioned by hereditary beauty. This is clear, in the little we are told about their physiques. The final George Mills has 'long teeth' and 'hinged and heavy wrists' (p. 258), and he and his father are 'not strong so much as knowledgeable about weight' (pp. 46, 85). A Turkish princess affects to marvel at a nineteenth-century George Mills, not just for being 'so tall', but also for having 'such long arms' (p. 410). The Millses seem always to be raw-boned and, when young, rather gawky and inclined to blush. It is not their rarefied beauty - not some captivating excess of either strength or debility - that has attracted the Millses' curse.

Indeed, the family's romance consists in the mere fact of their being



cursed: a major aspect of the curse itself is that they shall be 'bland, lumpish' (p. 166) - ordinary. Yet what (especially in America) does 'ordinary' mean? Another of Stanley Elkin's books, The Dick Gibson Show, sketches the range to be traversed in any pursuit of a lowest common denominator:

And beneath all the cliches of region, he believed in further, ultimate disparities between rich and poor and lovely and ugly and quick and dull and strong and weak. And structuring even these, adumbrating difference like geologic layer, quirk, personality like a coat of arms, and below personality the unspoken, and below the unspoken the unspeakable...<sup>2</sup>

The Millses believe above all in one disparity: that between 'our kind' and 'your kind' - but ultimately 'our kind' are all Millses while 'your kind' (the higher-ups) are picked out by an extremely discriminating Mills instinct. The attention of the Millses is focused almost exclusively upon this very narrow range, in the midst of their characteristically bizarre, exotic, and almost unparalleled adventures.

All the Millses live 'within striking distance of their oppressors' murderous pet peeves' (p. 316) - sharing the mediaeval Mills's 'notion that he held his life by sufferance, the moody good will of his unpastoral superiors' (p. 32). (In this regard - since we live in a world where 'another kind' has control of devastating nuclear, chemical, and subsonic weapons - ordinary people are all now obvious sharers in the Mills condition.) The Millses do not rub their hands together and beam, for all their 'serving-man's history and... butler's genes' (p. 321): there is 'something sour in their blue-collar blood' (p. 29). Yet the last (or modern) George Mills is impelled to be more wholeheartedly mediaeval than his Greatest Grandfather Mills ever was; to become a distinctively 'feudal' servant - characterised by George Orwell as 'at once doggishly faithful and completely familiar'.<sup>3</sup> The modern Mills is an 'anachronistic partisan', eager to be employed by (to attach his loyalty to) a cancer-doomed daughter of the astonishingly wealthy Claunch family; to this end, he deliberately adopts a kind of 1930s-American-fictional-detective model of the feudal servant's traditional familiarity: 'He had to make himself low, reserve and brutal syntax in his jaws like chewing gum' (p. 228).

As compared to earlier Millses, the modern Mills has the modern disease of power-worship; he 'loved to hear wealth's side of things' (p. 48), and there is relish in his implicit claim of irresponsibility for what he does under boss's orders (a non-unionist, he helps confiscate the furniture of evicted blacks in St Louis, tricking them into signing release agreements). The mediaeval Mills, by contrast, feels both 'slandered' and 'crushed' by the world's definition of his place in it; and the nineteenth-century Mills is a 'truly despairing man', who demands to have his duty explicitly defined by others, 'just to get the chance to thunder his smug, contemptuous There, you see? at them. He was, that is, at home only in his outrage' (p. 389). The fourth attitude is that of the modern Mills's father, who would have been a young child during the First World War, and who sees 'history' as so strong a force that rebellion against it need never be more than a token rebellion - he sees himself 'in the myth victim's delicious position, squeezed dry of force to change his life, with, at the same time, his eye on all the eleventh-hour opportunities that could change it for him' (p. 175).

These four are all the Millses the reader meets: the mediaeval Mills, born in about 1078; the nineteenth-century Mills, who left England in 1825; the modern Mills's father, born about when Tennessee Williams and Senator Joseph McCarthy were born; and the modern Mills, who was born in 1928, and fought in Korea. They are selected from a total of about fifty Millses - assuming that the family maintained its average of seventeen years per generation, mentioned in the nineteenth century. Their stories contain only skewed or fleeting reference to the kinds of events recorded in newspapers or The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle - yet they uncannily evoke the peculiar atmospheres and apprehensions of the selected times.

## II

The Millses' hereditary disposition to belong to the serving classes is a deadpan guying of the ideologies of Hitler, Eysenck, and Jensen. Modifying factors such as conventional education (an enriched environment) have no relevance at all to the Millses' 'second-rate, back-seat, low-down life' (p. 10); to 'their doom: never to rise, never to break free of their class, marked as Cain... forever to toil, wander, luckless as a roustabout' (p. 132). Rationally speaking, the paramount influence is always their being 'suckers for fate' (p. 175) - their inculcated expectations. As John Fowles has written:

We screen in our minds hypotheses about how we might behave, about what might happen to us; and these novelistic or cinematic hypotheses often have very much more effect on how we actually do behave, when the real future becomes the present, than we generally allow.<sup>4</sup>

But the Hitler-Eysenck-and-Jensen superstitions are darker territory than that.

In the 1930s, as a boy, the modern George Mills moves with his parents to the town of Cassadaga, in Florida. Hitler's Third Reich, then established in Germany, is not mentioned; and neither is the Nazis' eugenics-made-easy approach of liquidating gipsies and physical freaks (among others). But the town of Cassadaga, occupied almost solely by practitioners of the occult, is said by its 'psychic historian', Professor John Sunshine, to be founded upon a 'debased bedrock of declined vitiate genes' (p. 129): jointly upon a long-departed settlement of gipsies ('the marked race of Romany... that hampered, degraded, clipped-wing brood') and upon the physical freaks of a circus wintering nearby - 'your real McCoy Cains... discounted, slashed from the human race itself, whom chipped genes and bombed biology had doomed' (p. 134). (These 'origins' are supposed not to represent the physical ancestry of any of the townspeople; but other sources finally reveal Professor John Sunshine himself as the child of two 'freaks'.)

Thus, Cassadaga's 'psychic' industry is founded upon freakishness - which is to say, upon the terrors and insecurities that are one aspect of notions about inheritance, or 'blood'. As Leslie Fiedler has written, to be born a physical freak was to belong to 'a "Chosen People", which is to say, a people with no choice'; 'to be a performer of one's own anomalous and inescapable fate'.<sup>5</sup> The Millses' curse, likewise, although less visibly imprinted upon them, is to be always isolated, always foreigners: 'to see much of the world without in the least knowing what stood behind whatever had been left outside, up front' (p. 12); 'never, no matter the duration, to learn the language or the customs' (p. 13). In Cassadaga, in the 1930s, the hand of fate - heavy upon the physical



freak and the Millises - becomes no mere hand, no humanoid attribute of a possible God, but a vast and enigmatic territory in which all human beings wander as foreigners. The Great War - 'the plunge of civilisation into this abyss of blood and darkness', as Henry James called it - had brought a loss of faith in the powers of reason, a turning (for many) to the supernatural, where at least one was given answers, however equivocal. Cassadaga is prospering in a world where the 'ordinary man' and the soldier alike seem helpless to influence major events. As John Keegan has written:

what almost all the soldiers of the First World War, and many of the Second, even from the victor armies, testify to is their sense of littleness, almost of nothingness, of their abandonment in a physical wilderness dominated by vast impersonal forces, from which even such normalities as the passage of time had been eliminated.<sup>6</sup>

Cassadaga is 'the front lines of grief' (p. 150) - and the spilling over of grief and bereavement is the continuing legacy of the Great War, permeating the worlds both of the modern Mills and of his father, and rendering them quite distinct from the worlds of the earlier Millises. But the focus of the grief changes. In 1980, the grief-related chores of the modern Mills are physical - strictly confined to the body's death (at a time when Eysenck's and Jensen's ideas coexist with the practicalities of physical engineering in genetics). In Cassadaga, the Millises are 'errand-boys' of the supernatural - dealing with the spirit's after-death exigencies (at a time when Hitler's mystical conception of genetics is allied with his reputation as a 'pseudo black magician out of the same drawer as Amfortas in the Parsifal he so much admired... A British general actually told ((Malcolm Lowry)) that the real reason why Hitler destroyed the Polish Jews was to prevent their cabbalistic knowledge being used against him.')<sup>7</sup>

Stanley Elkin succeeds in conveying the relevant atmosphere without once mentioning the mundane minutiae of wars and of extra-Millsian musings upon genetics; he creates, instead, in an astonishingly rich display of inventiveness, the authentically sinister labyrinths of occultism, where admitted hocus pocus is employed by the genuine believer, and the grotesquely nauseous is never far away. Elkin distinctly encourages his reader to be more than a tabula rasa - to import an individual awareness of irony or congruence; thus, he facilitates a complexity reminiscent of the dialogue which Virginia Woolf described in 1928:

And so they would go on talking or, rather, understanding, which has become the main art of speech in an age where words are growing daily so scanty in comparison with ideas that 'the biscuits ran out' had to stand for kissing a negress in the dark when one has just read Bishop Berkeley's philosophy for the tenth time. (And from this it follows that only the most profound masters of style can tell the truth, and when one meets a simple one-syllabled writer, one may conclude, without any doubt at all, that the poor man is lying.)<sup>8</sup>

### III

The mediaeval adventure in George Mills establishes themes which are to recur throughout the book. There is the extravagant inventiveness people are prepared to unleash upon anything unfamiliar - as the mediaeval travellers did, in their suppositions about Horseland.

Similarly, the Mills of the nineteenth century, employed in the Sultan's harem, chances to create an initial impression that both his tongue and his genitals have been cut off; when, later, they are found to be intact, he is thought to have grown them back again - and theories of men with an especially strong proclivity, an excessive will, are devised to account for this. Such instances of invention occur again and again, in association with another theme: that Millses have no clear notion of the reputations they acquire - reputations which partly arise from their acting in accordance with a private vision of their role (the secret Mills history, very often). Even when the nineteenth-century Mills succeeds in conquering Constantinople in company with only one other man, he ignores the part played by his reputation as 'the cruel Janissary', and regards himself merely as a 'sidekick'.

The Millses' settled view of themselves has far more power than their achievements, their remarkable adventures. The modern Mills is said to have 'known the demonics of love and rage'; there has been 'something disastrous and screwy-roofed about his character which drew the lightning and beckoned the tornadn' (p. 54). But in his early fifties he comes to the conclusion (without any belief in God) that he has found grace, and is saved - 'like money in the bank' (p. 64). His interpretation of 'grace' is that 'nothing could ever happen to him, that he was past it' (p. 298) - and, secure in his grace, he continues to navigate dangerous situations, and to talk in two languages: 'the neutral patois of the foolish ordinary and a sort of shirty runic' (p. 62).

Mills becomes truly saved, however, only after his attendance on the death of the Claunches' daughter, Judith Glazer. Judith is a 'pain in the ass', with a 'talent for creative abuse, for industrial-strength practical jokes' (p. 200). She has been insane in the past (institutionalised for eleven years) and now has cancer. Thus she can be seen as the modern descendant of the consumptive heroines popular in the nineteenth century; in current metaphor, as Susan Sontag has written:

some features of TB go to insanity: the notion of the sufferer as a hectic reckless creature of passionate extremes, someone too sensitive to bear the horrors of the vulgar, everyday world. Other features of TB go to cancer - the agonies that can't be romanticised.<sup>9</sup>

The reader learns all about the unromanticised errands of cancer. Stanley Elkin is prepared to undress 'reality' - to introduce people to the kinds of nakedness they recoil from confronting; to obtrude even the embarrassingly private fact that they hate such confrontations. This applies both to Judith Glazer's cancer and to the earlier world of Cassadaga, where an astral projectionist claims that the dreams of the grieving are filled with unspeakable depravities and salacities. (In relation to this, the projectionist describes the 'truly disgusting deaths, one by one, of a blacksmith's four children, and the blacksmith's strange and soulless perversion, which the children's presence had prevented him from pursuing.') Professor John Sunshine observes: 'people, God bless them, are terrified of the strange' (p. 135); Dick Gibson (in *The Dick Gibson Show*) wants to know: 'Why couldn't folk take it? Why did they insist upon the quotidian? What was so bad about bad news?'<sup>10</sup>

Judith's mischief-making leads, after her death, not only to Mills's



actually being courted (for a time) by the rich and powerful, but also to his hearing all the bad news - all the latest gossip about the griefs of Judith's friends. His informant is a man named Messenger, who belongs to neither of the classes that the Millses recognise, and who has been stunned by the discovery that Judith has confided all the private griefs of her friends to some patrons of Meals on Wheels. As Messenger says, 'Everybody suffers. If you want to know the truth, I didn't know I had secrets until I found out that strangers knew them' (p. 215). Mills becomes addicted to this gossip about other people's bad luck, sensing 'the stirring of appetite, his pica curiosity making soft growls in his head' (p. 469). He likes 'a hint of something rancid, like a touch of hors d'oeuvre'.

The griefs are varied, insoluble - the hopeless kind of outlook so many moderns are familiar with - and then, suddenly, everything is transformed; story after story is absurdly brought to the happiest possible shaggy-dog ending; Mills's wife has to restrain him from attacking Messenger as he turns up again and again with more and more good news. These are miracle-transitions, recalling Judith's account of cures for insanity: 'We believed in trauma then... In the raised voice at the vulnerable moment... It was a sort of astrology... We believed in everything but character' (p. 201).

Thanks to all the good luck, Mills is no longer courted by the Claunches - any illusion of his being subtle and sophisticated is destroyed - if he pesters any of Claunch's people now, he risks being charged with some handy unsolved capital crime. This is all confirmation of the Mills myth as his father understood it - everything determined by fate, nothing by character.

In an ultimate summing-up scene, Mills finds himself addressing a church congregation about being 'saved'. He analyses the history of the Millses, which could be compared (by the co-operative reader) to the history of the American male psyche. Mills's mother (the reader sees) has been the first Mills wife to be more than just a 'mom' - the other moms are all so shadowy that no one has ever thought of their making any contribution, any alteration, to the Mills genetics. But Nancy Mills rebels against her husband's determination to live 'by other people's judgment of him' (p. 178); she wants her children to assign blame not to fate but to character. After producing the traditional Mills son, Nancy gives birth to a stillborn Mills daughter, whose death is obviously caused in part by Nancy's efforts to save both children from the Mills curse - but which Nancy attributes (with the outraged, barely spoken, changeless, and superstitious revulsion of the bereaved mother) to the blasting effect of the Mills genes upon the female. Parapsychology reveals to the young Mills that Nancy then commits adultery (in despair of - or in revenge upon - the guilty Mills genes); and Mills now believes that somewhere, as a result, he has a sister - a Mills only in the sense that she is half-sister to him.

As he addresses the congregation, it becomes clear that the Mills curse has been, not so much an inability to 'rise' in the social scale, but a narrowness in their sympathies - an inability to respond to other human beings as brothers and sisters. Mills has a sudden inspiration that his sister is not only alive but also doing well - an inspiration that widens his allegiances and finally frees him from the Mills 'history', causing him to admit that he is not saved, and to end the book by 'lightly' acknowledging the rest of the congregation as 'brothers and sisters'.

The scope and inventiveness of George Mills are exceptional - but the question arises whether Stanley Elkin does not present himself as a 'gigantic dwarf' (a description applied by D. H. Lawrence to Balzac, and by George Orwell to Dickens). He reveals the human nakedness that other writers recoil from, but he omits much that is not less human for being the only dimension that other (and often lesser) writers have portrayed. Romantic sexual love - idealism - religious fervour - self-forgetful transcendence: all of these are missing. At most, their presence in the world is suggested by physiological effects - 'the knockabout slapstick of the human heart' (p. 292) - or by the cumulative impression of a 'sad intricacy' in human behaviour.

The overwhelming effect, despite that missing dimension, is of astonishing variety and complexity. The Mills tradition, sketched out in this review, relates on many levels to contemporary feelings of helplessness and irresponsibility; everyday absurdity is intensified in settings and prose that defy both prediction and boredom; and Elkin utterly demolishes the notion that 'ordinary' could ever have a simple single meaning. Part of his magic is in his description of scenes the reader is unlikely ever to witness - such as the interior of a mediaeval Polish salt mine, with its 'mitigated light, watery, milky as the hour before sunrise save where the torches, igniting salt, exploded in a showerwork of sparkler ferocity, white as temperature' (pp. 23-4). The vivid evocation can create in readers an illusion of having only just missed the same experience in real life, and the conviction that they would have registered exactly what Elkin describes (since his is the only description, and done so evocatively) - thus, readers are filled with the glow of realising that they possess a depth of sensibility never before sufficiently appreciated. That kind of extension - that sense of there being more, within oneself and everywhere, than anyone else has imagined - is the major wonder of Stanley Elkin's world.

#### NOTES

- 1 Stanley Elkin, The Dick Gibson Show, Random House: New York, 1972, p. 165.
- 2 Ibid., p. 251.
- 3 George Orwell, 'Charles Dickens', in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds.), The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, vol. i, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 482.
- 4 John Fowles, The French Lieutenant's Woman, Panther Books: London, 1971, p. 295.
- 5 Leslie Fiedler, Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self, Simon and Schuster: New York, 1979, pp. 32, 273.
- 6 John Keegan, The Face of Battle, Jonathan Cape: London, 1976, p. 322.
- 7 Harvey Breit and Margery Bonner Lowry (eds.), The Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry, Jonathan Cape: London, 1967, p. 76.
- 8 Virginia Woolf, Orlando, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1942, p. 182.
- 9 Susan Sontag, Illness as Metaphor, Random House: New York, 1979, p. 35.
- 10 Elkin, op. cit., p. 76.



LUCY SUSSEX writes fiction (a story appeared already in Dreamworks, and two more accepted for publication) and critical articles (including contributions to The Wellsian, Foundation, and The Bulletin of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand).

THE TORPEDO AND  
THE SOFT-BOILED EGG

by Lucy Sussex

Discussed:

Valencies, by Rory Barnes and Damien Broderick  
(University of Queensland Press 0 7022 1763 8;  
October 1983; 230 pp.; \$A7.95)

Valencies, the literary offspring of Rory Barnes and Damien Broderick, is reminiscent of the jokes beloved by ageing British comedians: what happens if you cross a torpedo with a soft-boiled egg? In the case of Valencies, the collaboration reads not so much as the recognisable product of Broderick and Barnes, as an unlikely mating between Frank Moorhouse and Jerry Pournelle. Fascist galactic empire meets Balmain in the seventies.

Or rather, the novel depicts such an empire from an unusual perspective: that of five freewheeling libertarians. As such, it is a credible attempt to put so-called real people into science fiction. To quote the blurb, printed in sad red upon muddy teal: 'They are not Luke Skywalkers planting bombs, or secret agent philosophers; if they're going anywhere it's to work, and to bed with the wrong people, and to hopeless revolutionary meetings.' The characters, two heterosexual couples and an elderly hobo named Catsize, succeed in much the same way as those in Terry Carr's Cirque - despite the gadgets of the sf future, they are recognisable types. Although, to quibble, only Catsize and the woman Anla seem to leap off the pages. The other two men are interchangeable, and the second female character, Theri, is a nonentity.

However, the problem with Catsize and his friends is that they are perhaps a little too familiar. In fact the whole novel is redolent of the twentieth century, and in particular the late sixties. One imagines that the presence of immortals (Catsize is 2000 years old) would act as a stabilising factor, in much the same way as the King James Bible kept the English language more or less static for 300 years, without the linguistic changes that occurred, for instance, between Chaucer's time and Shakespeare's. Yet would a distant planet be named Chomsky, or a city Bolte? Would the catphrase of Don Marquis' Mehitabel, 'toujours gai' (p. 5), survive to the year 4004?

Valencies would initially seem to be an example of one of Peter Nicholls's sf monsters, the insufficiently alien society (first cousin to the insufficiently alien alien). Yet this judgment has to be qualified by the fact that Valencies draws upon the monstrous galactic empires of Heinlein and Asimov, and partly functions as a parody and critique of these well-known works. As Damien Broderick himself said in the Australian: 'a universe which conserves American values... is a horrible notion.' And the novel is further complicated by allegorical overtones - the planets Newstrilia and Victoria are dear old Oz, and the empire represents America. Seen in this context of 'pre-remembering the

future', the anachronisms become deliberate, and integral to Valencies.

One imagines that a real collaboration between Moorhouse and Pournelle would be a stylistic mutant that only its fathers could love, and the pleasure of Valencies is that the voices of both writers are complementary. It is not that they are indistinguishable, as with Pohl and Kornbluth, but that the contrast between Broderick's verbal pyrotechnics and Barnes's slightly flatter, more lyrical style is never jarring. Valencies is well-written by both its authors, and possesses an energy that sometimes explodes into linguistic play:

This man can see into the future. Fucking incredible, really, you just rip out a few million eigenvectors from your mathematical sketch of an octillion human beings, what's that in hydrogen molecules, say three and a bit by ten to the twenty-three to the gram, into ten to the twenty-seven, shit, brothers and sisters, we're statistically equal to three kilograms of hydrogen gas, yes, you plump for the major characteristics you think you'd like to play with and code them up into genes and build yourself a little mimetic beastie that stands in for what you figure pushes and pulls thee and me and all our star-spangled relatives, and you breed the little buggers in a tasty itemized soup and watch the way the mutants go. (p. 19)

Valencies is ultimately flawed, not by its content, but because, like Richard Lupoff's Space War Blues, it is simply published too late. Any novel that begins with a quotation from the Jefferson Airplane and ends with the words of Bob Dylan is clearly anchored to a particular time, which is now past. Had Valencies been published during the sixties, the period which informs it (although it is difficult to name a possible publisher - certainly not UQP), its talk of revolution and radicals would have been far more topical. As it is, Valencies is out of its time in the cynical eighties, like Isaac Asimov would be if, as the novel cheekily posits, he survives to the year 4074.

- Lucy Sussex, February 1984

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